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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE.

April 12, 1893.

No. 755.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LIX.

WILD PETE THE BRONCHO-BUSTER DETECTIVE



OR,

Corralling the Ranch Counterfeiters.

The Story of the Death-in-Life Band's
Last Stand.

BY GEORGE C. JENKS,
AUTHOR OF "THE DRUMMER DETECTIVE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE GRIZZLY FROM THE ROCKIES.

"WHAR did you git thet horse?"

The question was short and sharp, and there was no mistaking the threat conveyed in the accents of the speaker, even if the frown on his rugged countenance had not indicated the probability of his taking a strong hand with his party in the "Necktie Social" that seemed likely to follow.

Half a dozen men, mounted on the small wiry bronchos of the plains, and dressed in the rough

THE SPLENDID STALLION, WITH A VICIOUS SCREAM, REARED HIGH IN AIR,
BUT WILD PETE WAS THE MASTER.

but picturesque costumes of cowboys, were sitting quietly looking at the young fellow to whom the query had been put, and who seemed hardly to comprehend the dangerous situation in which he found himself.

He had thrown himself from his horse, and rested with his arm over the animal's neck, looking good-humoredly into the face of his questioner.

"Faith, gentlemen, Oi'd like to tell ye, but sorra a one o' me knows just how Oi did foregather with it. Oi was down in the town beyant last noight, an' Oi slept on the flure of a bar-room till airly this mornin', an' thin the next thing Oi knew Oi was galloping over the bogs an' downs, a-troiyin' ter foind the ranch of Mister Grant, till Oi met you boys, an' illigant gentlemen yez all are, be the way."

"What's yer name?" demanded the spokesman of the other party, gruffly.

"What's yer own?"

"Thet'll do, boys. He's tryin' ter be funny now. String him up!" growled the other, with a deeper scowl.

As he spoke, he lifted a lariat from his saddle-bow, and, with a dexterous whirl, had sent one end of the sixty feet of cord over a branch of a cottonwood tree immediately above him. The cast was made in such a way that the rope hung down just low enough, with its loop well in evidence, to slip over the head of a man standing on the ground.

"Hould on!" cried the young man, when he saw this ominous move. "Me name is Dan McPhelin, an' Oi'm from New Yark. I want to foind the place where me friend, Bob Grant, lives, out here. An' as for the nag, phwy, ye can take it. Sure it's throuble enough it has brought to me, so it has."

"All right, young feller! Thet sort uv thing might go down East, but it's too thin fer these hyar parts! Every one knows Bob Grant in Wyoming, an' I s'pose you hev ther name jist ter help yer out in case yer git in er tight place. Wal, we don't take no stock in horse-thieves 'round hyar. You ain't ther fu'st rustler ez hez been swung over ther creek with his boots on, an' I don't s'pose ez you'll be ther last. Let him go, boys!"

"Say, Sam, don't yer think it would be er good move ter take him ter ther ranch an' let ther boss see him afore we choke him? We kin always hang him, ef we find ez he's er fraud," suggested one of the cowboys, a young fellow with a smooth face and the general appearance of not being so seasoned in the life of a plainsman as his companion.

"Shet up, Babe! You ain't got nothin' ter do with this hyar picnic, do yer understand? Fer two cents I'd take yer up an' spank yer."

There was a frown on the face of the young fellow addressed as "Babe," and his hand shot to the butt of his revolver, that hung at his belt, but Sam Sharkey did not notice him. He was too busy placing the noose around the neck of the young Irishman, who, almost petrified with fear now that things were taking such a serious turn, could not offer any resistance.

Sam Sharkey had presided at this sort of thing before, and knew exactly how to go about it.

"Git down, thar, boys, all uv yer, an' give us er raise hyar! He don't weigh more nor er hundred an' fifty, I reckon, but I'll be shot ef I'm goin' ter lift him all myself."

His five companions threw themselves from their bronchos, and four of them seized the slack of the rope at one end of which the luckless Dan McPhelin, with his hands fastened behind him with a big red cotton handkerchief that they found in his pocket, was all ready to be swung into eternity.

The fifth man, who did not touch the rope, was Babe—or, to give him his full name, Walter Vincent. "Babe" was a nickname applied to him by Sam Sharkey on account of his youthful appearance, and it had been adopted by every one else around the cattle-ranch of Robert Grant.

"Up with him!" yelled Sam.

There was no pity to be seen in his dark countenance, and but little in that of his companions except Babe.

The cord tightened as five men pulled on it just enough to make the victim stand on tiptoe. Then it was loosened, and Sharkey asked:

"Wal, will yer 'fess up thet yer took thet

mule from ther front uv the Dazzle Saloon down in Uintah, yesterday?"

"Och, wurroo! Oi c'u'dn't tell yez, 'deed Oi c'u'dn't!" wailed Dan, as he looked vainly about him for some hint of mercy in the faces of his captors.

Sharkey stood twirling his long black mustache impatiently while Dan was speaking in a broken voice. Then he gave the signal for the execution by leaning back and pulling at the rope.

"All right, Sam! Up with him!" growled a fellow by his side, whose anything but prepossessing appearance was not improved by the loss of his right eye.

Babe Vincent, who had been standing by the side of his horse, looking on at the scene with flashing eyes, here darted forward, and seizing the rope between the cowboys and the limb, pulled it away with a jerk so as to snatch it almost out of their hands and let the victim loose.

With a dextrous movement, he had pulled the noose off his neck, and was about to cut the handkerchief from his hands, when Sam Sharkey, in a fury, hurled himself upon Babe, and with a blow of his huge fist in the chest, sent him spinning a dozen yards away.

"Durn all kids among men!" he growled.

"Why ain't yer at home with yer mother?"

But, if Babe was a kid, he was a plucky one.

Hardly were the contemptuous words out of Sam's mouth, when the young fellow was upon him, with his bowie-knife uplifted, ready to strike his big antagonist's breast.

"Look out, Sam!" howled the one-eyed man.

Sam turned, and with the ease of a man used to such encounters, tore the knife out of Babe's hand, and caught him by the throat.

"Look hyar, yer little coyote. Ef I hev any more trouble with you, I'll hev yer bounced off the ranch an' sent ter Boston ter er female seminary. Now, git!"

Sharkey swung the boy to one side, and then, holding out the knife to him, scowled threateningly as Babe took it and quietly stepped over to his horse, apparently completely subdued.

Dan McPhelin had been watching this little scene with the interest that might be expected of one whose life was in such imminent danger, and who saw in the interposition of Babe his only chance of escape.

It was all over now. Sam seized the end of the rope, and, with a fierce oath, tugged at it with all his might.

Dan McPhelin was in the air.

"Let him down!" cried Sam. "Maybe he'll confess."

The rope was slackened, and poor Dan was dropped to the ground.

But he did not confess. He was unconscious.

"Playing off!" was Sam Sharkey's verdict. "Up with him, and keep him up this time."

The five men were bracing themselves for the task, and it was evident that Dan McPhelin's minutes were numbered.

Babe had turned his face away. He could not bear the sight. Sam had just given his last order, when Babe's quick ear caught the click of a horse's hoofs on the rocky ground.

A high butte—part of the Big Horn Range—lay to the right, and around this butte there was some one riding, close to the rocks, on the hard ground.

"Sam," said Babe, who was glad of any excuse to stay the proceedings, if only for a moment.

"Wal?" responded Sharkey, curtly.

"Thar's somebody coming."

"Let him come. Up with him, boys!"

The lariat had become entangled in some way, and the one-eyed man was trying to straighten it.

The sound of the hoofs could be heard plainly by all now.

At last the rope was free, and Sharkey yelled: "Thet's right, Winty Jim. Now, er good tug all together."

But the tug was never made.

"Quit yer foolin' thar!" bawled a strange voice. "Yer hear me growl, and when I spread my jaws you kin bet thar's er grizzly come ter yer camp! I'm er lookin' fer er dozen men to bite in two fer my supper, an' I like my myals raw! I'm er mad b'ar from ther rockies, an' I'm ther boss uv ther Black Hills when I'm at home!"

The man who made this speech at the top of a powerful voice was one who would command attention anywhere.

Six feet in height, with broad shoulders and long, sinewy arms, he appeared like a giant as he sat easily in his saddle, with his long legs much nearer the ground than was usually the case with cowboys. His broncho was rather larger than the ordinary run of those animals, and any judge of horseflesh could see that he was more than ordinarily tough and wiry. He did not seem to feel the weight of his gigantic rider, between whom and himself there was evidently a perfect understanding.

Although the man gave utterance to such fierce hyperbole, and talked generally in such a desperate strain, his face was not that of a tough. He had a clear, albeit rather dark complexion, set off with a small, well-trimmed black mustache, that could not hide the even row of white teeth beneath. From beneath the broad sombrero that he wore gracefully on the back of his head streamed a wealth of brown hair reaching to his shoulders, and giving him a most picturesque aspect, taken in connection with his decidedly handsome face. His age could not have been over twenty-eight, and his look of perfect health warranted the assumption that he had spent most of those twenty-eight years in the open air.

"Who air you?" snarled Sam Sharkey, after the first start caused by the stranger's appearance.

"I'm Wild Pete—"

"Ther Broncho-Buster, eh?" interrupted Sharkey. "Yes, I've heerd uv you."

The expression of Sharkey's face indicated that he was not particularly pleased at the advent of the man whose name he knew so well, but that made no difference to Wild Pete.

He comprehended the whole matter in a moment. Drawing a bowie-knife, he had cut the lariat before Sharkey realized what was going on, and Dan was lying on the ground, free, with Wild Pete giving him some liquor from a flask, while the lynching party looked on with astonishment at the stranger's effrontery.

Only for a moment did Sharkey watch these proceedings. Then, with a howl, he drew his revolver and turned upon Wild Pete.

"Wal, blame my cats!" yelled Wild Pete, with a laugh, as he tore the pistol out of Sharkey's hand, and, taking him by his waistband, threw him clear over the group of horses, with as much ease as if he had been a kitten!

CHAPTER II.

WILD PETE IN A FIGHT.

WILD PETE did not seem to think he had done anything unusual in pitching a man head-first over half-a-dozen horses. He was bending over the young Irishman again, and watched him as he gradually came to himself.

"All right, now, young feller?" asked Pete.

"Be the powers, is it me or a carpsie thot's loiyin' here? Bad seran to the b'yes thot brung me to this fix. Me neck feels loike an ould rope, so it does."

"Wal, git up! It's better fer yer neck ter feel like er rope than ter hev er rope 'round it."

Dan arose to his feet, and looked closely at his rescuer. Then he gave a start of recognition.

"Phwy, sure ye air the mon as I wuz wid in ther saloon beyant, ain't yez?"

"Mebbe."

"Thin, be the powers, you know how I come by this bob-tailed nag as they air raising all the shindy about. Won't ye tell them?"

The cowboys had been listening to this colloquy, and now Sharkey, who had picked himself up, limped over to Wild Pete, and snarled:

"What do you know 'bout this hyar horse?"

"The horse belongs to the Bob Grant's outfit, an' I'm takin' it over ter ther ranch."

"Likely yarn!" sneered Sharkey.

"Look hyar, Sam Sharkey, I know you, an' ef you don't quit your insinuations, durn me ef I don't chuck yer over thet limb next time."

Wild Pete spoke as if he meant it, and Sharkey involuntarily retreated a few paces, muttering threats of vengeance as he did so, that, if they reached the ears of Wild Pete, evidently did not disturb that gentleman.

"See hyar, boys, I'm on my way to Bob Grant's ranch, an' I'm ez hungry ez er coyote in January. Ef yer don't take me an' give me some supper, durn my skin ef I don't take er big bite outen Sam Sharkey, an' wind up on Wintry Jim fer dessert."

The man with the one eye and white hair started at hearing his name thus familiarly spoken by a stranger, but Wild Pete pretended not to notice it, except by an amused smile that just raised the corner of his black mustache and gave a momentary glimpse of the row of teeth beneath.

Without taking further notice of any one, Wild Pete leaped on the back of his horse, and galloped away around the rocks, with the air of a man who had settled a trifling matter to his entire satisfaction. Babe Vincent was by his side as the two drew out of sight of the rest.

"Pete," said the young man, earnestly, "how are things going?"

"All right," returned Wild Pete, in a low voice, and without any suggestion of the rough cowboy dialect that he had used in talking to the others. "Have you been keeping your eyes open?"

"Yes, but I have not found out anything particular."

"What about the girl?"

"She is kept in complete ignorance of the real business done at the ranch. They are afraid to trust her."

"So? Have you dropped onto the place in which the work is done?"

"No. He is a shrewd old fox. I don't even know whether any of the gang are among the cow-punchers he has there."

"Well, we shall see in the course of time. Look out. Here come the rest."

Wintry Jim was a little in front of the rest of the cowboys who were trotting along on their wiry little bronchos, and he was looking suspiciously with his one eye at the young fellow and Wild Pete, as they drew their horses a little apart.

"That's all right, but I'm er goat ef you fellers ain't met afore. Thar's somethin' in the wind, an' I b'lieve thet Babe is in it, in spite uv his innercent looks," soliloquized Jim. "I'll hev ter warn ther old man."

Wild Pete turned in his saddle, and Wintry Jim could almost have sworn that the dark eyes looked into his very soul.

"Hello, Jim, whar did yer git yer hair thet color? It was black ther last time I see yer. Hev yer been standin' in ther snow, or ain't ther no place 'round hyar ez yer kin git ha'r-dye?"

"I never see yer afore ter-day in my life," growled Jim, in a sulky tone, as he screwed up his one eye and tried to remember the face of this mocking giant, who seemed to know everybody, and, worse than all, to be familiar with everything in their lives that they preferred to keep hidden.

"Mebbe not, but I'll say this fer yer—you kin deal 'er brace game uv faro erbout ez slick ez any one I ever met, an' I've known lots uv 'em, in my time."

The party had been skirting the butte, and now turned into a mighty canyon, with rugged, pine-clad cliffs rearing up thousands of feet on each side, and affording an excellent ambush for the Indians that in earlier years had been so plentiful in this neighborhood.

Wild Pete looked around carelessly, and saw that Dan McPhelan was riding with the party, on the horse that had caused all his trouble, and evidently not in the least disturbed by the dangerous experience he had just undergone.

"Jim," whispered Sharkey, as Wintry Jim dropped behind and rode beside him, "what do yer make uv thet feller?"

"Nothin' but er blow-hard. You want ter take it outen him when we git ter ther ranch."

Sam Sharkey looked inquiringly at his companion, who nodded reassuringly, and then turned his head to hide the slight smile he could not repress.

"I'll do it. Ef I don't, skin me erlive," whispered Sam to himself. "He had ther darned nerve ter give me back my gun, an' ter tell me not ter be so handy with it with

strangers. I'll git ther drop on him an' wipe him out jist ez sure ez he's er horse-thief."

"Thar's ther ranch," suddenly exclaimed Wild Pete, as he turned his horse out of the narrow mountain-pass. "Right close ter ther canyon and yet with er good wide space fer ther cattle an' horses. It's ez pretty er location ez I ever see."

He touched up his broncho with the quirt he held carelessly in his left hand, and the next minute was standing under a grove of hemlocks and cedars that completely shaded the front of the house, with its home-like veranda, while cottonwoods at the back of the house almost hid the other buildings for the wagons and such sick horses and cattle as might require extra care.

For a minute Wild Pete waited for some one to come out, and then, as the rest of the party rode up and took their horses around to the stable to fodder them and make them comfortable for the night, he went into the house, with Dan McPhelan on his heels.

For a moment Wild Pete thought the room was empty, but a sound of some one breathing as if asleep attracted his attention, and he burst into a laugh that seemed to make the logs in the walls fairly quiver.

"What air yer grinning at, yer big stiff?" inquired a voice, sweet in spite of the sharp ring in it. "Ain't yer got no manners? Ye're big enough ter know better, anyhow."

Wild Pete took off his sombrero and made a sweeping bow to the speaker, who now stood in the middle of the room, regarding him curiously.

"Och, be St. Patrick, she's a darlint!" muttered Dan, as he took off his hat and almost bent double.

A young girl, perhaps eighteen years of age, in a blue calico dress reaching to her ankles, set off with a white apron with a bib, and frilled at the bottom, with the effect of making the girl a very dainty picture. Long fair hair, in wavy curls, hung down her back. Her face was of a healthy brown and red, showing that she was not afraid of the weather and that she did not think much about her complexion, pretty as it was.

"Whar's Bob?" inquired Wild Pete.

"Dunno whar he is. What's yer name?"

"Folks call me Wild Pete."

"Ther Broncho-Buster? Oh, yes, I've heerd uv yer! Wal, you'll hev some fun ef yer goin' ter tackle some uv ther stock we hev in ther corral, I'm tellin' yer."

"I am goin' ter tackle it. That's what I'm hyar fer," replied Wild Pete, quietly.

"Hello, what d'yer call this hyar?" suddenly asked the girl, pointing to Dan, who was watching her open-mouthed, lost in admiration.

"Dan McPhelan, my assistant, an' ez squar' er feller ez thar is 'tween ther Snake River an' ther Pacific Ocean," returned Pete.

Dan bowed lower than ever, at the same time bestowing a look upon the girl that caused her to burst into another fit of laughter.

"Quit thet, or you'll kill me," she screamed. "My, I'd like ter buy you, ter amuse me when I git lonesome."

"Faith, you shall have me for nothing. I'm at your service," said Dan, with a blush that made his face as red as his hair.

"You air, eh? Wal, jist take this bucket, an' git me some water from the spring over thar," laughed the girl.

Dan McPhelan took the pail, and marching over to the rocks in the direction the girl pointed out, where there was a spring to be seen from the door of the house, was soon busy filling the pail.

Wild Pete was looking earnestly at the girl, as, without taking any more notice of him, she began to spread the big table for supper.

She was used to strangers coming to meals, and there was nothing to cause her any feeling of awkwardness in the presence of Wild Pete. She thought him rather a handsome man, and that ended her thoughts of him.

"Your name is—" said Wild Pete, and then stopped.

"Wal, what is it?" asked the girl, mockingly. "You're so mighty smart, you must know thet."

"I think I know it. Don't ther folks 'round hyar call yer Sue?"

"Mebbe."

"I know they do," avowed Wild Pete to himself, as he took the bridle of his broncho over his arm and led him to the stable in the rear of the house.

Sam Sharkey, Wintry Jim and Babe Vincent were all in the great open stable, rubbing down their horses and giving them fodder for the night. The horses were simply fastened to the wall by their halters, which were of unusual length, so as to give the animals as much freedom as possible without their being likely to get away and cause trouble in the stable.

Wild Pete took the heavy saddle and bridle from his broncho and led him to a corner away from the rest, and gave him the corn and hay that lay in heaps in the middle of the room. He was busy with these duties when he was startled by a shriek of warning from Babe and a hoarse laugh that he recognized at once as that of Sam Sharkey.

"Look out, Pete," yelled Babe.

Not knowing what danger threatened, Wild Pete's revolver was in his right hand almost simultaneously with Babe's cry, and he was planted with his back against the wall, half protected by his horse before he knew what was the matter.

One glance told him the truth, however.

It was not men he had to fear at this juncture. Standing within a few feet of him, its head down, its large white teeth snarling, and its fore feet pawing the dirt floor of the stable, as if eager to spring upon his prey, was an immense black stallion, mad with rage.

Only a moment had Wild Pete to appreciate his situation when the animal commenced his attack. A snort of rage, and the stallion sprung upon him with all four feet.

A leap to one side on the part of Pete, and the forefeet rattled against the wall with a crash that startled all the other horses in the stable. Pete's broncho was not fastened, and as the stallion struck the wall he turned tail and, reaching the door, was off toward the corral some five hundred feet away, wherein were the reserve horses belonging to the ranch. The gate was open, and he jumped through with a neigh of pleasure at finding himself among so many of his own kind who were not of so belligerent a disposition as the stallion.

Pete could perhaps have reached the door, too, but he did not care to do so. He replaced his revolver in its case, and snatching his lariat from his saddle, held it loosely in his right hand, his left still holding the long-lashed quirt that he had not yet put down on entering the stable.

The stallion, upon recovering from the shock of throwing himself against the wall, turned with bloodshot eyes to take vengeance on his enemy who had thus far evaded him. Rearing on his hind feet, he waved his forefeet like a pugilist, and actually came toward Pete on his two hoofs, ready for battle!

"Wal, I'll be durned ef you ain't got er mighty 'riginal way uv fighting, but it won't go this time," exclaimed Pete, carelessly, as he noticed the face of Sharkey and Wintry Jim at two of the small windows. "Come on!"

The stallion needed no invitation. He leaped at Pete with the same vicious purpose that he had before, and with equal want of success. The man was too quick for him and had sprung out of the way just as his four-footed assailant reached the spot where he had been a second since.

"We'll hev ter bring this ter er close, I guess," cried Pete. "Now, ye ugly varmint, look out!"

Swinging his lariat around his head, he cast it at the stallion. It went straight to its mark, but the low roof of the stable interfered, and instead of settling around the animal's neck, as it would have done otherwise, it struck him a sharp blow on the head.

The stallion emitted a cry of rage that was almost human, and, stung with the pain of the blow, he darted at the open door, and into the corral.

Momentarily Wild Pete was inclined to follow him. Then he muttered: "Never mind. To-morrow will do," and sauntered out of the

stable, to exchange glances with Sam Sharkey that meant trouble between them in the near future, if looks can mean anything.

CHAPTER III.

THE SECRET OF THE RANCH.

SUPPER was over in the Grant Ranch. The meal of salt pork, bread and coffee, with plenty of preserved fruits to help out the plainer viands, had been disposed of under the care of Sue, and the men who had intended to lynch Dan McPhelan in the afternoon were now handing him food and exchanging the usual courtesies of the table with him in their own rough manner, while Wild Pete and Sam Sharkey were eating and drinking side by side, with Babe Vincent between Wintry Jim and Sharkey. Whatever might be the feelings of the men for each other, they did not allow them to interfere with the enjoyment of the meal, and, for all that a stranger could have seen, it was a real happy family.

One circumstance, of which no one seemed to take notice, but that gave Wild Pete plenty to think about, was that the owner of the ranch, Robert Grant, had not appeared.

No one asked where he was or why he did not come to his supper. Sue might have been able to answer such a question, but it is doubtful whether she would, and as no one bothered her with it, it made no difference.

There is plenty of hard work on a stock farm in Wyoming, and after supper the men who have been riding about the range all day on their various duties are not much inclined for anything save a quiet discussion of their pipes ere they tumble into their bunks. Probably they thought that Bob Grant was able to take care of himself, and if he wasn't it was his own business.

These were the sort of thoughts that passed through the brain of Wild Pete as he lighted some very strong tobacco in a very strong short pipe, and, throwing himself upon a bench that ran along the wall opposite the fire, smoked peacefully, apparently not noticing anything that might be going on about him.

Sue lighted a lamp, and was deep in some fancy work that required a great deal of snipping with scissors, and caused her to breathe very heavily as she tried to work out problems in silk threads and queer-shaped holes.

Some two hours passed in this way.

Dan McPhelan had dropped asleep on a buffalo rug across the fire-place, and all the other men had retired to their general sleeping-room in the rear of the house with the exception of Babe Vincent.

Sue sighed heavily as she at last found a key to the problem she had been trying to work out, and laid down the silk and cloth she had been engaged on.

"Wal, you fellers hed better sleep whar you air in this hyar room ter-night. Thar ain't any room with them fellers back thar, I know. I'll fix yer better to-morrow. Good-night!"

"Good-night," repeated Wild Pete and Babe, as the girl left the room, while Dan McPhelan indulged in a prolonged snore, as he became feebly conscious that some one was talking, ere he fell off to sleep again.

For perhaps an hour the three occupants of the apartment remained perfectly still.

Dan McPhelan was sleeping the sleep of the just, and his two companions had been lying on the bench with their eyes shut, as if they were either asleep or deep in thought.

"Babe!" whispered Wild Pete, as he raised his head and looked at the young man.

"Hello!"

Babe was evidently wide awake.

"Ain't it 'bout time?"

"Shouldn't wonder."

"What 'bout—" Wild Pete nodded toward the unconscious Dan McPhelan, without mentioning his name. "Is he safe?"

"You ought to know better nor me. I never see ther feller afore ther boys caught up with him ter hang him fer heving thet thar horse."

"Wal, I think he's all right," said Wild Pete. "I helped him ter-day, an' he seemed ter take er sort o' shine ter me down in Uintah yesterday."

"Wal?"

"I'll trust him."

"All right." What you sez, goes, yer know, captain," answered Babe, with the air of one who has shifted all responsibility from his shoulders, and is prepared to take the consequences.

"Babe," whispered Wild Pete, solemnly.

"Wal?"

"Don't call me captain. I'm jist Wild Pete hyar, don't yer know. I am talkin' like ther rest uv ther gang 'cause I don't want ter rouse no 'suspensions, but ef you go ter bein' so cussed official with me, you will jist spile everything."

"I'm sorry, Cap—I mean Pete. But yer know it kind uv comes natural now you air with me ag'in."

"A shot from er six-shooter or Winchester mought be nateral, Babe, but it 'ud be durned uncomfortable. You'd better be careful."

"I will," responded Babe, humbly.

"I'm half afraid this hyar Grant hez his 'spicions ez thar's somethin' up, an' we'll hev ter watch ourselves ef we air goin' ter land this hyar thing, ter say nothin' uv savin' our skin," remarked Wild Pete, in the same guarded tones he had used right along.

"What's ther fu'st move? Air you goin' ter do anything ter-night?"

"I want ter find evidence ag'in' him, ef I kin, so thet I kin take him red-handed, d'yer see?"

"I see. But it's goin' ter be lively work ter ketch him. He's ez sly ez er fox an' ez full uv fight ez er hungry grizzly. He's erway now, but it ain't never safe ter bank upon his not droppin' on yer at any moment."

"We must chance thet."

"Wal, I'm ready ter do thet," responded Babe, with perfect confidence in his companion.

"Whar do yer think ther crib is, Babe?"

"Ain't got er very cl'ar idee, but I b'lieve it ain't so very fur from whar we air, now."

"Right, yer air, I b'lieve, Babe, an' I'm goin' ter find it right now."

Wild Pete stepped cautiously to the door and opening it a little way, looked out.

Everything was quiet outside. There was enough moonlight to have enabled him to see any one who might have been moving about in the clearing beyond the trees that shaded the veranda, and certainly there was no one under the trees or on the veranda itself.

"All right, Pete?" asked Babe.

"All right outside. Now we got ter look at the inside. Thet's whar there mought be danger."

The door through which the boys had gone to bed, and by which Sue had disappeared afterward, was opposite the outer door and led into a hall from which all the other rooms in the house opened. The bunk room, in which the rangers slept, was at the extreme end, being, in fact, an apartment built out from the house proper. Sue's chamber was a small apartment immediately behind the principal sitting-room, in which were now Wild Pete, Babe Vincent and Dan McPhelan.

Everything was quiet in this direction, as Wild Pete discovered when he carefully and quietly opened the door and peered into the dark hall. The only sounds were the snoring of the weary cow-punchers, who were "pounding their ears" with the earnestness to be expected of men who had been in the saddle since six o'clock in the morning until bedtime.

Dan McPhelan was still sleeping on his buffalo-robe, utterly unconscious of what was going on between Wild Pete and Babe.

Wild Pete stepped over to the sleeper and stirred him gently with his foot.

"Whorchk-k-k-k-k!" was the unintelligible response.

"Great snakes, how this feller *does* snore!" whispered Pete.

"Yas, sleep is er great institution fer him, I should think," returned Babe, with a silent chuckle.

Wild Pete poked at Dan again.

"Whorchk-k-k-k-k-och-och-k-k-k-k-wow!"

Dan was not to be awakened by a mere poke.

Wild Pete scratched his head in doubt. Then he stooped and shook the sleeper with considerable force.

"Whorchk!" came the response, short and sharp.

"Try ag'in, Pete. You'll fetch him in course o' time."

"S'pose you come an' try him. Durned ef he ain't in a trance, I b'lieve."

"I'll git him outen it," declared Babe, as he raised his foot and bestowed a kick upon Dan that made him start to a sitting posture with a most portentous "Whorchk-k-k-k!"

"Hello, Dan! Awake?" asked Wild Pete.

Dan rubbed his eyes for nearly three minutes, as he tried to remember where he was. Then he exclaimed; "Howly saints! Oi belave Oi must ha' been slapin'."

"Oh, no. Just winkin' yer eye, that's all," said Babe.

"Dan," put in Pete. "What is your business with Bob Grant?"

"Oi want wurruk, that's all," answered Dan. "Oi have had experience with horses and cows, in the ould counthry, an' Oi t'ink Oi w'd make a good cow'ye."

"Wal, kin I trust yer not ter tell anything yer see hyar ter-night, d'yer think?"

"Oi s'pose so. Oi dunno any reason why Oi sh'udn't do anything Oi can for a mon as saved me loife, by-the-bye."

This simple speech gave Wild Pete all the assurance he desired. He felt that he could trust this young Irishman, and he did not question him any further except to ask him whether he had any weapons.

"Oi hev that. Look at this revolver. Faith, it wull shoot off six toimes by jist lookin' at it, widout pullin' the thrigger at all at all."

"Must be a daisy," remarked Babe.

"Deed it is. Oi c'ud kill off the whole county wid it if Oi get it good started."

"Wal, yer mought hev ter git it started ef yer stay out hyar in Wyoming. Yer can't tell when yer may want a weapon hyar, but yer hed better not let it go off widout pulling the trigger, er yer mought kill ther wrong feller."

While Wild Pete was speaking he was not idle.

As the reader has gathered from the conversation between him and Babe, he was at Bob Grant's ranch for a purpose altogether distinct from the ostensible business—that of cattle-raising—of the owner, and that business was one requiring great caution.

"Babe, I believe thar's somethin' holler under this hyar room."

"Mebbe."

There was a cheap carpet covering the whole floor, for Sue would have comfort, and her uncle, Bob Grant, could afford to humor her.

Wild Pete walked about the room, occasionally pressing his foot hard in some spot that appeared to him likely to conceal a trap or an opening.

"Wal, it beats me," he said, at last. "Ther place, wharever it is, must be easy got at, 'cause he kin git outer sight so easy, an' kin come back seemingly from nowhar at a minute's notice."

"You air pretty well posted, Pete," observed Babe, admiringly. "I don't see whar yer git all yer p'int."

"Thet's so."

Wild Pete was standing in front of the fireplace now, looking thoughtfully into the embers of the dying wood fire. They cast a red glow upon his handsome features, and seemed to impart an almost supernatural expression to the keen eyes. There was the stamp of a gentlemen upon his face, that belied his rough Western dialect and somewhat uncouth manner.

The fireplace was wide and old-fashioned, with a ponderous wooden mantel.

This mantel seemed to have a fascination for Wild Pete. He could not get rid of the idea that it held some secret that he should like to have revealed.

"Dan," he said, after leaning on the mantel for a minute or two as if in deep thought.

"Thot's me name."

"Lend er hand."

"Faith, Oi wull. Me hond or me fut is yours."

"Take hold of that end of the mantel, an' when I say 'Pull,' tug at it."

"All roight! Let'er go!"

Babe was watching the proceedings of Wild Pete curiously, but he did not offer to assist, because he knew that when his partner required his help, he would say so.

Wild Pete had noticed a curious knot in the wood of the mantel underneath, and when he pressed it, it gave way slightly.

"Thet's ther key, sure," he whispered to himself. "Now, Dan. Air yer ready?"

"Oi am."

"Pull!"

Dan McPhelan pulled with all his might, and the next instant was sprawling on his back, with a section of the mantel on him.

Wild Pete didn't laugh, as he might have done under some circumstances, for the pulling out of the piece of the mantel had revealed a hole by the side of the fireplace nearly five feet high, by two wide.

This hole was pitch dark, but there was a strong draught from it that indicated a long passage ending he could not tell where.

Babe rushed forward to look at it.

"Pete, thet's ther place, sure?"

Pete was about to reply, when the sound of hoofs caught his ear.

"Hist! Look out! Help me, Babe!"

In a flash the two men had seized the piece of mantel lying on Dan, had replaced it, and with Dan on his buffalo rug again, snoring, were themselves lying stretched on the bench, also wrapped in slumber.

They had barely settled down, when the front door opened, and the owner of the ranch, Bob Grant, strode into the room.

CHAPTER IV.

A DEAD FACE.

A MAN of gigantic height, with dark, beetling brows and a suspicious, hunted look that would attract the attention of any one immediately. His dress was that of an ordinary ranger, and long spurs jingled on his shapely boots as he walked. In his hand he carried a rawhide quirt, and he flicked his boot with it as he looked around the room and tried to understand who the three men were lying around.

He recognized Babe, and stepping up to him, punched him in the ribs in no gentle fashion.

Babe was on his feet in an instant.

"Hello, boss!"

"Who are these people?"

"One uv 'em is er friend uv mine, an' ther other is er young feller ez wants ter join ther outfit, I b'lieve."

"Huh!" grunted the other, and without another word he marched off to the rear of the house.

Hardly had he left the room when Wild Pete awoke from his sleep and sat up on the bench.

"What 'll he do now, Babe?"

"Go ter bed. He allers does when he comes in like thet. He's very reg'lar in his ways."

"Won't come out here ag'in, yer think?"

"Not likely."

"But he mought?"

"Yes he mought. Better he still fer erwhile, I guess."

"Be the powers, Oi niver see so much secrecy in me loife," put in Dan, from his nest on the buffalo-robe.

"Never mind, Dan; thar'll be some fun fer yer afore you git out uv this part uv ther country," Wild Pete assured him.

"Foightin' an' divarsion of that soort?"

"Shouldn't wonder."

"All right. Thin, Oi'm yer man, Oi'll promise yez."

"Look out!" warned Babe, in a whisper, and all three were fast asleep on the instant.

Bob Grant put his head in the doorway and looked around. The room was in semi-darkness, for wild Pete had extinguished the lamp, and all the light came from the moon outside and red embers on the fireplace within.

One glance around the apartment, and the scowling face withdrew.

"Go out and stay out," muttered Babe.

"What's struck yer ter-night, I wonder?"

"Faith, he's loike Widder Clannigan's ghost, as used to walk all down in Clonmara. Oi remimber—"

But whatever reminiscence Dan McPhelan intended to relate was cut short by Wild Pete who had sprung from his bench and clapped his hand over Dan's mouth.

"No yarns now. We hev work ter do."

Babe did not need to be told what his part

was. Softly he opened the back door leading into the hallway, and disappeared. He returned in a minute and reported that Bob Grant was lying in a bunk in the room with the rest of the men, and was evidently settled for a night's sleep.

"I know him, Pete," declared Babe. "He won't disturb any one till the morning. He always says thet he kin do all ez he hez ter do in er day, without hev'in' ter work all night, an' when once he turns inter his bunk thet settles him till it's time ter turn out."

"Wal, then, we'll go ahead. I don't want ter stay hyar any longer on this trip then it takes me ter fix him. I won't put in more time than I hev ter, an' I'd jist ez soon take him this very night ef I could do it easily."

"But yer can't, yer know, Pete. Thet's outer ther question," remonstrated Babe, seriously.

Wild Pete did not answer. He was busy with the mantel. He did not require the help of Dan McPhelan this time, but with a dexterous twist, had pulled the wood out himself, while his two companions stood near the door with the amiable intention of throttling Bob Grant if he made his appearance.

"Babe," Wild Pete called, in a whisper.

"What is it?"

"I'm going down yar myself. You close up the hole, and when I rap on ther other side, let me out, and let me out quick. *Savvy?*"

"Yes; but I think ez yer hed better take this hyar fellow with yer. You don't know what yer might meet."

"No; I'll go myself this time. In case any one comes, they would not be likely ter miss me so much, but ef two or three git out at once thar'll be er hue an' cry sure."

There was sense in Wild Pete's argument, and Babe saw it. So he did not interpose any more objections.

Wild Pete, with a bowie-knife in his hand, plunged boldly into the hole, and went forward he knew not where.

A flight of eight steps led him into what seemed to be a small cellar. He felt around it in the dark, and found it solid earth, with a door on one side, leading, according to his calculations, toward the rear of the house.

This door was barred on the side that Wild Pete was on.

"H'm! Must be another approach to this place. Evidently he never feared interruption from this side. Well, you cannot always tell how things will come. It might have been better for him to have the bar on the other side," muttered Pete.

He took away the bar, and walked forward along a low passage that would not allow of his standing anything like upright. In fact, he was bent nearly double during most of the hundred feet or so that he traversed.

He was stopped by another door, that was fastened, but not by a bar. It was locked.

"Ah, the old fellow does not trust altogether to bars. I thought he had too much sense for that," observed Pete, as he fumbled in his pockets.

"I guess this will do the business, however."

He held a small piece of strong wire, bent at the end, and he introduced it into the keyhole with the air of an expert. A few twitches and pokes, and there was a slight grating sound as the lock flew back, and the door opened.

Cautiously Wild Pete went forward. Instinct warned him that he was getting to the heart of the mystery, and the danger increased in proportion.

The place was in black darkness. He felt his way about, and his hand fell upon some rough substances on a bench that he recognized as metal.

He listened for a few moments, and then resolved to have a light at all hazards.

A box of wax matches in his pocket soon enabled him to light up the gloom. He held a match in his hand looked about him.

A room perhaps twelve feet square, filled up with everything requisite for making counterfeit money. Molds, a furnace, stamping machines for particular work, and bars of lead, by the side of oither bars of solid silver and gold, that were mixed with the baser metals so as to give a colorable resemblance to the real thing in the imitation money made.

"At last!" muttered Wild Pete, as a smile passed over his features and lifted the black mustache from the white teeth. "Now, to show them who Wild Pete really is. There is enough evidence here to send Mr. Robert Grant to the Penitentiary, I think."

He lighted another match and made further examination of the contents of the room. He found several packages of money neatly made up in rolls and put away in canvas bags, with the amounts outside.

Some contained bogus gold and others silver.

Taking some of the coins in his hand, he examined them closely.

"Splendidly made," he muttered. "About as dangerous a counterfeit as I ever came across in all my experience, and I'm not a new man in the United States Secret Service, either. A little light and greasy to the touch, but would go almost anywhere unless people were put on their guard."

As he made this remark he happened to raise his eyes toward the corner of the room furthest from him.

There was something in the room with him!

Wild Pete obtained but one glimpse of the object, and then, as his blood ran cold through his veins, and his long hair seemed to rise under his sombrero, his match went out.

With trembling fingers he tried to light another match. He, who feared nothing in corporeal shape, was reduced to an agony of horror by what he had seen in a corner of that room.

It was not of this world. Of that he was sure.

He had no control over his fingers, and it seemed as if he could not light that match.

At last the match lighted, and he looked, with fearful eyes at the corner where he had seen the shape.

It was gone!

With one bound Wild Pete had reached the corner, and then beads of cold perspiration burst upon his forehead.

There was no door or other opening at that part of the room. It was a solid wall.

"Great snakes!" muttered the detective, in horrified tones. "I saw a face, white and ghastly. It was the face of a dead woman, with wide open, glassy eyes, that saw nothing, and yet seemed to transfix me. I can swear I saw it. I only had a momentary glimpse, but I was not mistaken. I must get out of this, or I shall go crazy. Durn my ugly picture! I never knew before, that I had nerves. But, that was too much for me."

The expiring flame of the match showed him the way to the door by which he had entered, and he managed to reach it just as he found himself in darkness again.

"I must light another," he muttered. "I dare not go through this place in the dark. I am shaking like a leaf."

He felt in his box and uttered an exclamation of dismay. The box was empty!

There was no use bewailing what could not be helped, so Wild Pete, with his bowie-knife held in a tighter clutch than usual, stumbled along toward where he hoped Babe Vincent would be ready to release him.

He traversed the narrow passage and reached the room referred to before.

"Now for the steps," he thought, "and I shall be out."

He placed his foot on the lowest of the eight steps, and in another moment would have been at the top of the flight, when his eye fell upon something, and, with a shriek that he could not repress, he fell in a trembling heap on the dirt floor, with his face buried in his hands.

Standing on the top of the steps was the shape he had spoken of! It appeared to be a woman in a long white robe, that was lighted up with some sort of phosphorescent glow that seemed to be in it. The face was dead. It was livid, appearing all the more so because framed by a wealth of long dank, black hair. The eyes shone like glass, and were entirely devoid of expression. The whole apparition was as one that had arisen from the grave, with an old-fashioned shroud on, and it was about as good an excuse for a strong man like Wild Pete falling down in a fit of terror as could well be conceived.

CHAPTER V.

THE BATTLE WITH THE BLACK STALLION.

WHEN the sun gilded the mountains at the dawn of day following Wild Pete's adventure in the mysterious underground chamber there was nothing about Bob Grant's ranch to suggest anything supernatural.

Everything and everybody about the place was strictly matter-of-fact. Work was the only thing thought of, and it had nothing to do with the occupation of which Wild Pete had obtained conclusive proof in the course of his midnight investigations.

Breakfast was the first consideration, although some of the men had been out to the corral to look at the horses already.

Sharkey looked at Wild Pete with a gaze in which there was deadly enmity as he arose from the table.

"D'yer think yer kin do anything with thet thar stallion this morning?" he sneered. "I'll try," was Pete's quiet response.

"Wal, come on," and Sharkey led the way to the corral.

Wild Pete looked sharply around for Grant, but he had not appeared at breakfast, and the detective did not care to ask any one while he sat at breakfast where the host might be. He knew enough to be sure that any attempt to penetrate the mystery of Grant's life openly would only bring suspicion upon himself.

He strolled out to the corral, with Babe Vincent by his side and Dan McPhelan just behind him.

"Have you seen Grant, Babe?" he whispered, as he stopped for a moment and appeared to be busy lighting his short black pipe.

"No."

"Wonder ef he hez any idee thet I wuz down thar?"

"Ef he hed, we'd hev heerd uv it afore now," opined Babe.

"I s'pose so, but after thet ghost I saw down thar, I wouldn't be surprised at anything in this hyar ranch."

Babe did not answer. He did not know what to make of his chief's story. He had helped him out of the underground chamber and fastened up the secret entrance by the mantel. But the description of the woman with the dead face puzzled him, the more so that she had certainly not been in the place when he went down the steps to bring Wild Pete up to the sitting-room.

This was no time to try and understand it; however, for they were in the midst of the bull-whackers, who had all turned out to see what Wild Pete would do with the stallion.

Wild Pete was there as a professional broncho-buster—or horse-breaker, as it would be called in the East—and they wanted to see him work on the toughest subject in Bob Grant's outfit, the stallion aforesaid.

Into the corral went the whole party. Each man had his lariat ready, in case he needed it, but all stood out of the way to give Wild Pete room.

With his rope loosely coiled in his right hand, Wild Pete cast a rapid glance around the corral.

The stallion was in a corner, looking quietly about him from among a herd of horses.

Suddenly, the animal seemed to catch sight of Pete and to recognize him as his foe of the evening before.

With head down and a snort of defiance, he rushed at the man who was steadily waiting for him.

Half a dozen bounds and he was nearly upon him. But he missed his aim, for Wild Pete sprung aside and at the same time cast his rope in such unerring fashion that its loop was around the horse's neck and had tightened before he could stop in his mad rush.

Wild Pete threw himself back, with the rope against his thigh, and his heels digging deeply into the soft earth.

There was a mighty jerk, that seemed enough to tear the man to pieces, and the stallion was thrown head over heels, so that he actually lay on his back, with his hoofs in the air.

"Wal done!" cried Sharkey, surprised out of his dislike for Pete by the excellence of the maneuver.

But the horse was not conquered.

He rolled over and was on his feet again, even as Sharkey spoke.

He rushed at the Broncho-Buster, but a twist of the rope jerked him to one side and toward the outlet of the corral. In another moment he was on the open plain, with Wild Pete still holding the end of his lariat, and pulling him this way and that.

Three times did Pete let the stallion run the end of the rope, and three times was he pulled up with a jerk that threw him off his feet.

He may be a horse-thief, fer anything I know," growled Sam Sharkey to Wintry Jim, "but he kin handle horses in er way thet I've never seen afore, an' I ain't any tenderfoot either."

The stallion was getting tired, and the strain on Wild Pete's arm was beginning to tell upon him, too, in spite of his steel-like muscle.

"Pete, hedn't yer better bring him ter time now?" asked Babe as he stepped to the side of the other.

Wild Pete did not answer, but he thought Babe Vincent's advice good, if he could only follow it.

The horse was running around him now at the full length of the rope, without attempting his former tactics of running at his captor.

"Yer brute! I'll try yer now!" muttered Pete, below his breath.

Watching his opportunity, the buster suddenly ran in toward the animal, and seizing his mane with his right hand, with one agile spring was on his back!

Now commenced a battle royal, that made Dan McPhelan's eyes open wider than they ever had before in all his life.

The stallion tore over the plain for half a mile away from the group of spectators, before a tug at the lariat and a dig with Pete's spurs made him turn and come back at the same fierce speed.

"Howly Moses! Stick on his back! Ow, the wild divil! Luk at him now! Jist luk at him! Did yez iver see the loike!" howled Dan, in an ecstasy of admiration.

The splendid stallion with a vicious scream reared high in air but Wild Pete was the master. His seat was as firm as a rock.

With the lariat twisted around his left hand and his quirt, with its short handle and cruel rawhide lash in his right, he tugged and slashed at the stallion alternately and together, while ever and anon the sharp spurs dug into his sides and maddened him more and more.

The horse was now covered with foam and perspiration, and it was evident that the courage and brains of the man on his back were too much for the mere brute strength of the noble but wicked animal who had been only too eager to try conclusions with him.

"By Caesar, he's beat ther horse, ez sure ez shooting," muttered Sharkey. "Wal, he done it wal, but I wish ther brute hed killed him."

The stallion was now making his final effort for victory. His head was down between his fore feet, and he was bucking with a determination only to be equaled by that of Wild Pete not to be thrown.

Up in the air as high as he could spring went the horse, and down he came each time with a jar that was enough not only to throw any ordinary rider, but to shake out all his teeth into the bargain.

But Pete had ridden too many bucking bronchos to be disturbed by his present experience, rough as it was.

With knees pressed tightly into the sides of his steed, he did not allow more than a few inches of daylight to be seen between his seat and the back of the stallion at each rise, and was always firmly in his place as the hoofs came down with a thud on the ground.

"By ginger, Pete, you hev him!" shouted Babe, joyfully.

"Hev him? Faith, he has ivery bit of him, so he has," joined in Dan McPhelan. "Moses, what a sinsation he w'u'd make at Donnybrook!"

The stallion was getting very tired, and jumped more feebly at every fresh effort.

At last, his tamer sprung from his back, but still holding the lariat with a firm hand.

The stallion ran to the end and pulled, but in a mild way that showed all the fight was out of him. Wild Pete pulled him up short and he fell.

For a moment he lay, as if determined to stay where he was, but Pete gave him a cut with his quirt, and he arose to his feet slowly and painfully.

Pete stood at his head and patted his neck. "Had enough, old feller?" he asked, in the soothing tones he might have applied to a naughty child.

The stallion stood still, completely subdued, and as he looked with his great expressive eyes into Pete's face, one might have imagined he was paying the involuntary tribute to his conqueror that exceptional strength and skill will always draw from a really noble foe when defeated.

Pete took the lariat from the stallion's neck, and gave him a light touch with his whip, in obedience to which he trotted off to the corral, a very much milder horse than when he had left it an hour before.

The men were still looking after the stallion as he made his way to the corral, when a strange voice joined in the remarks of the cowboys standing about.

"I'd like ter see you at ther house."

Without turning his head, Pete knew who had spoken. It was Bob Grant, rancher.

"All right," replied another voice—that of Wintry Jim.

"Oho!" thought Pete. "I thought so!"

He turned and saw Grant and Wintry Jim walking leisurely toward the house, while the other men made their way to the corral to get their horses and set about the duties of the day.

Only Babe, Dan and Sam Sharkey remained behind with Wild Pete.

"Wal, yer made it, didn't yer?" asked Sam, with the sneering inflection in his voice that seemed to belong to it naturally.

Wild Pete looked at him carelessly.

"You mean ther black stallion? Why, uv course I made it. Thet's my business."

"Is it?"

There was something in the tone of Sharkey that made Pete's dark eyes blaze.

"What d'yer mean?"

"Oh, nothin'. Only I'd like ter be sure ez you ain't in any other business. Ye seem ter know a good deal 'bout horses, an' it wouldn't be much trouble fer ye ter take any animal ez might suit yer fancy, I guess."

Pete bit the end of his long mustache, as Sharkey went on:

"I don't say you would steal horses, don't yer know, but—"

He did not finish his sentence, Pete jumped over to him, and, seizing him by the throat, swung him around so that he was lying on his face across Pete's knee, as helpless as a child.

"Now, Mr. Sharkey, I'm goin' ter give you er lesson!"

Babe and Dan looked on in silence, wondering what was coming next.

They had not long to wait. Holding Sharkey in a grip of iron with his left hand, Wild Pete swung his wicked quirt with his right, brought it down, crack, crack, crack, on Sam Sharkey.

A howl of pain and rage broke from the sufferer at each blow, which culminated in a shriek as Wild Pete gave him a twist and a kick that sent him flying half a dozen yards away.

"Don't try thet, either," cried Wild Pete, as he drew his revolver and covered Sharkey, just as that ruffian's hand flew to his own weapon.

"Cuss yer!" growled Sam, with a fervor that told how thoroughly he meant what he said.

"Just ez yer please, Samuel, but I'm goin' ter keep my eye on you ez long ez I'm around hyar, an' ef yer try any monkey business, why, I think you'll suffer."

"Will I?"

"I'll bet yer er new saddle yer will," answered Pete, airily. "Now, git!"

With Wild Pete's revolver still covering him, Sharkey walked off to the corral, rubbing the place where Wild Pete's quirt had fallen, and breathing threats of vengeance that did not reach Wild Pete, and would not have troubled him if they had.

CHAPTER VI.

A TRIAL OF STRENGTH.

"SAY, stranger, you're a beaut!" broke in another voice as Sam disappeared, the voice of a girl.

Dan McPhelan's hat was off in a moment and he was smoothing his red hair in a nervous fashion that provoked a peal of silvery laughter in the same accents.

"Wal, ef you ain't ez soft ez they make 'em," exclaimed Sue, for she it was. "Let yer hair erlone, will yer? D'yer want ter set fire ter ther place?" Then, turning to Wild Pete, she continued. "Say, I want ter tell yer that you kin handle er horse or er man ez well ez I ever see, an' perhaps somewhat better. Give us yer paw."

She held out a plump brown hand, and Wild Pete took it in his strong grasp without hesitation. He felt that this was a compliment to pay him for more labor than he had had with either the stallion or Sam Sharkey.

"Faix, Oi wish Oi had a chance to shake honds with you," said Dan, pitifully.

The girl burst out into a peal of laughter as she held out her hand to Dan.

"Take it an' shake it all yer want."

Dan took advantage of the permission and did shake it as if he never wanted to let go.

"Thar, you ain't shakin' fer ther drinks. Quit. Thet's ernough, ain't it?" remonstrated the girl, still laughing, as, with some difficulty, she drew her hand away.

Babe Vincent had been watching this scene with an amused look on his face, but he had seen, what might have escaped any one who did not know Sue as well as he did, that she had come out with a more serious purpose than merely complimenting Wild Pete on his skill as a broncho-buster.

He beckoned to the girl and drew her a little apart.

"What is it, Sue?"

"What's what?"

"What hev yer come out fer?"

"How d'yer know I'm out fer anything, Mr. Babe? Mighty smart, these days, it seems ter me," answered the girl, defiantly.

"Now, Sue, yer needn't try ter fool me. I know yer hev somethin' on yer mind. You know ez yer kin trust me, don't yer?"

For a second the girl looked at the young man as if she would not allow him to pry into her secret, if she had one. But a tear stole into her eye, as she heaved a sigh and said:

"Babe, thar's mischief up at ther house—deviltry, an' more uv it. You hear me squeal."

"What is it?"

"It consarns him, an' thet's all I know," she replied, jerking her head in the direction of Pete, who was examining his lariat to see whether it was frayed as a result of his encounter with the stallion.

Babe was all attention.

"How do you know?"

"Bring him over."

"Pete," called Babe.

"Come hyar."

Sue looked straight into the eyes of Wild Pete, as she asked, in her direct way:

"Who are you?"

"Wild Pete, the Broncho-Buster."

"You lie!"

Pete started. It was only a girl who applied such an expression to him, but he was not used to it, and he could not help showing it.

"What do you mean, Sue?"

"The girl tossed her head impatiently, so that the long fair curls spread over her shoulders in a shower of spun gold.

"What's ther use uv yer givin' me thet guff? I know ez yer ain't any common man, an', what's more, Bob Grant knows it, too."

Pete could not hide his surprise this time.

"Oh, you think you are so almighty smart, you fellers, when er gal like me kin see through er thing in er minute."

"Sue, what is your object in coming out hyar ter tell me this?" asked Wild Pete, earnestly.

The girl drew herself up proudly.

"I'll tell ye. I come uv decent folks, an' I don't 'low nothin' ter be done around me ez ain't squar' if I know it. My uncle, Bob Grant—if he is my uncle, which I doubt sometimes—don't intend ter give yer er squar' deal. Thet's all."

Babe Vincent and wild Pete exchanged looks, while Dan McPhelan, listening with open mouth, seemed to be trying to understand what it was all about.

"How do yer mean?" asked Wild Pete.

"See hyar, air you er detective or air yer not?" asked Sue, suddenly.

"You kin trust her, Pete," murmured Babe in the ear of the Broncho Buster.

"Whisperin' afore ladies ain't perlite," observed Sue, in a matter-of-fact way.

"I beg your pardon, Sue. I fergot," said Babe.

"A gentleman never forgits," she replied.

"Thet's so, Babe, my boy," laughed Wild Pete. "Thet's one on you this time."

Then, turning to Sue he went on: "You are right. I am a detective, in the employ of the United States Secret Service, but I am known throughout the Western country as Wild Pete. Very few people know me as anything but what I appear to be."

"You couldn't fool me, though," said Sue, with her favorite toss of the head, "an' I wuzn't s'prised when I heard Bob Grant tell Wintry Jim it would be necessary to wipe you out afore you wuz twenty-four hours older. An' they know yer right name, too."

"What did they call me?"

"They said thet Wild Pete was another name for Peter Swift, one uv the durnedest sharpest detectives ez wuz ever sent out uv Washington."

"Much obliged to them, I'm sure," laughed Pete.

"Wal, yer needn't be, 'cause they mean mischief, I'm tellin' yer," insisted the girl. "Thet's all I hev ter say. Now you must look out fer yerself."

She skipped away with a light step, and they saw her run past the corral on her way to the ranch, while Pete fell into a brown study.

"Babe, you just stay around within call in the course of an hour or two, while I look over the ground," ordered his captain, after a few moments' reflection. "It's cl'ar thet Grant sent fer me so ez he could git erway with me. He knew I wuz after him, an' he thought he would be ahead uv me. Dunno ez I blame him much."

"Whar air you goin', Pete?"

"Ter ther house. You may es well come with me, Daniel."

"I will thet," returned Dan, who would have followed Wild Pete to the end of the world if required.

"Mr. Grant, will yer shew me what horses yer want me ter tackle fu'st?" asked Wild Pete, as he suddenly appeared in the principal room of the ranch, where he found Bob Grant and Wintry Jim sitting in earnest confab at the table.

Bob turned around and scowled, but Pete took no notice of this questionable mode of receiving him. He was wondering what Wintry Jim and the rancher were talking about.

"Go out ter ther corral and ask for Sam Sharkey. He'll show yer. Thar's er big string uv colts ez will hev ter be broke right erway. You air ther man ez they call Wild Pete, eh?"

"Yes."

"I ain't ever see yer before. Hev yer been in these hyar parts long?"

"Not very long."

"From ther East?"

"I've been East."

"Ah! Ever in Washington?"

"I've been in Washington."

"Ah! Wal, thet 'll do. Who's this other feller?"

"Wants ter j'ine yer outfit, I believe."

"Faix, I do," put in Dan, finding himself referred to.

"All right. You kin loaf around ter-day, an' sort o' git acquainted. Guess I kin find somethin' fer yer ter do," said Bob Grant, carelessly, as he waved his hand as a signal that the interview was at an end.

Wild Pete and Dan strolled out toward the corral. No sooner were they out of sight and hearing than Bob Grant, who had been careless in his manner, sprung to his feet, and grasping his revolver growled:

"Why didn't I kill him right thar?"

"'Cause yer hed too much sense," observed Wintry Jim. "Thet would not be any way ter do it. We kin git rid uv him easily enough. What we want ter do now is ter git thet stuff shipped away ez soon ez we kin. I tell yer thet feller is loaded fer b'ar."

"Watch!"

With this single significant word, Bob

Grant stalked to the mantel, and with much more ease than Wild Pete had done it, pulled away the false work and disappeared down the steps, leaving Wintry Jim to replace it.

"I beg yer pardon, Wintry," said a voice almost in his ear that he recognized as that of Wild Pete, "but they tell me ez Sam Sharkey hev gone after some cows. Hev you time ter come ter ther corral with me?"

With an oath, Wintry Jim was on his feet, looking into the smiling face of Wild Pete that was filling up the space of a small window at the back of the bench where Grant and Wintry Jim had been sitting a few moments before.

"What air yer sneaking around hyar fer?" demanded Wintry Jim, with a devilish gleam in his one eye.

Wild Pete did not reply, but he walked swiftly around the house and into the room, where he stood facing Wintry Jim with an expression that boded trouble if the conversation were kept up any longer in the same strain.

"Don't talk ter me like thet ag'in, Wintry Jim. I don't like it, an' I might hev ter take yer up in my hands and break yer in two. Savy?"

Wintry Jim laughed derisively.

"You must think you air mighty strong, but p'raps I hev some muscle, too."

He took up a stout iron poker from the fireplace, as Wild Pete drew his revolver and covered him.

"You will observe ez I hev ther drop on yer," observed Wild Pete, courteously.

"Pshaw! I wuzn't goin' ter hit yer with it," replied Wintry Jim. "I could hev shot yer 'fore yer could draw yer gun ef I'd wanted ter. Look hyar!"

He held the poker across his knee, and with a sudden effort, bent the iron almost double.

"Thet's all," continued Wintry Jim. "I jist wanted ter let yer know thet when it comes ter breakin' er feller in two, I might be in it ez well ez you."

Wild Pete smiled, as he put up his revolver, and, taking up the poker, looked at it a moment, then laying it across the back of his neck, he braced himself, and with a tremendous effort, bent it straight again.

"Wal, I'll be durned!" ejaculated Wintry Jim.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DEATH-IN-LIFE BAND.

BOB GRANT had not any of the trouble in finding his way along the underground passage that had beset Wild Pete.

He walked down the eight steps with the air of one who knew his way and could not be led astray by anything, darkness included.

The door that was barred when Wild Pete had explored the subterranean arrangements of the house, was fastened in the same way now, although Wild Pete had left it unbarred the night before, as we know, when he was so scared by the supernatural appearance of the woman with the dead face. Some one must have been down there after him and put up the bar.

Grant opened the door and crawled through the narrow passage till he reached the other door, the lock of which Wild Pete had picked. It was not necessary to pick it now. Bob Grant took a key from his pocket and opened it easily, but closed and locked it again on the instant.

The room presented a different appearance from that when it had been entered by Wild Pete.

It was lighted up by two lamps in reflectors on the walls facing each other, and there were two figures bending over the furnace, that was glowing brightly and making still more light in the room.

Strangely enough, the room was not uncomfortably hot. The explanation of this might not have been understood by a casual visitor, but it may as well be stated here that an ingenious connection with the chimney of the big sitting room above took off almost entirely the smoke and fumes of metal that might arise from the furnace, and at the same time drew away the heat so that the underground room was always at a bearable temperature.

It is needless to repeat that the room was devoted to counterfeiting operations, but

it may be added that the gang employed in the manufacture of counterfeit money was one of the boldest and most extensive in its operations that had ever been known in the western country.

"Wal," said Grant, as he fastened the door and looked toward the furnace.

Neither of the figures at the furnace spoke, but one of them turned and waved its hand as a sort of greeting.

The word figure is used here advisedly, for it was impossible to see who or what the persons were that were working over the furnace.

Both wore long white garments that covered them completely, except the face. *And the face was that of a corpse*, with long, dark hair streaming over the shoulders, adding to the ghastly appearance of the dead countenance, in which the glassy eyes glared at nothing, and yet somehow seemed to see everything that was going on.

For a moment this face was turned in the direction of Bob Grant, and then the figure resumed its work at the furnace, as if impatient over being interrupted.

Grant did not show any fear or this horrible apparition, but went coolly to work examining the work that was being done, and then proceeded to gather up the rolls of coin that lay ready packed in paper on a bench, and put them into a sack that opened in the middle and was inclosed at either end, as if intended to be loaded across a saddle.

The two figures at the furnace kept on with their work, and poured metal into molds in a matter-of-fact way, at variance with their preternatural aspect, and as if they were taking a strong interest in a decidedly mundane operation.

"Solon!" murmured a hollow voice, that came from one of the figures, although the bloodless lips could not be seen to move.

"What is it?" asked Bob, who, it seemed, was not known as Bob Grant in that mysterious company.

"The work is nearly done now for the time. When shall we gather after this batch?"

Again the hollow voice, like that which we are told proceeded from the oracles in ancient times, and utterly undistinguishable as the voice of a human being.

"Can't tell yer yet, boys. I'll hev ter see how this hyar lot goes off. Howsomever, you might be at the crib down in Evanston to-morrow night, at twelve o'clock, an' then we kin see what we will do."

"We will be there," said both the shapes, the other, who had not looked up or spoken since the entrance of Grant, now joining in.

Three taps at the door!

"The signal!"

It was the first shape that spoke, and at the same time it produced a revolver that it wore under its clothes, in a very worldly fashion, and as if it were afraid to trust to its ghostly nature to protect it in case of attack by human agency.

Grant was not a ghost, so that it did not seem peculiar for him to draw his six-shooter as he walked to the door and replied by six raps, in quick couples.

One heavy bang was the response to this, and he looked around at the ghosts, as if asking their opinion.

Both solemnly bowed their heads.

"All right, boys. Hyar she goes."

He unlocked the door and cautiously opened it a little way. Then as if satisfied, he opened it wide.

In stalked another figure, so much like those at the furnace, that it might have been the twin sister of either or both.

Marching slowly to the middle of the room, it lifted up its right hand, white and skinny, and grasped that of the nearest figure. The two then raised their hands three times with a regular motion and slowly released them from the grasp of each other.

The same ceremony was gone through with the second figure, and then the three, leaving the metal in the molds to cool, proceeded to fill two more bags with the manufactured coin, as Bob Grant had been doing before the entrance of the last comer.

"Wal, everything is ready now fer to-night," said Grant, when the three bags were all loaded up and all the completed coin had been thus put out of sight.

"It is, oh, Solon," murmured the last

figure. "Verily, had I not better go to see whether the coast is clear?"

"How was it when you came?"

"Sadly, I fear, oh, Solon!"

"Durn yer jargon!" growled Grant, under his breath. Then, aloud: "Who waz thar?" "The son of Belial, he whom they call Wild Pete!" was the solemn reply.

"Ah! Cuss him!"

"Curse him!" came from the three figures in hollow tones.

"What shall we do 'bout this hyar feller—this Wild Pete?" asked Grant, looking from one to the other of the dead faces.

It may have been only Grant's imagination, but the glassy eyes seemed to brighten as the last comer muttered: "Death!"

The other two figures lifted their right hands and repeated:

"Death!"

"When?" asked Grant.

"To-night!" said the last comer, and his two companions hissed together:

"To-night!"

The compact was now ratified in a way that seemed peculiar to these strange beings and Bob Grant.

The four walked into the center of the room with right hand outstretched, and each took that of the figure facing him—or her.

Then the four repeated the words: "By Solon, we swear that the Death-in-Life will keep its word. If we prove traitor then life from death shall be cut off. Hear us, Solon!"

Hardly had these words been spoken in solemn chorus, Grant joining in with the rest, when the signal once more sounded on the door.

All four placed their hands on the butts of their revolvers, as Grant went to the door and gave the response of the six raps, which instantly drew forth the bang.

"Who expect we to-day?" asked Grant, looking around in hesitation.

"Only one of the Death-in-Life Band is near here that I know of, oh, Solon!" murmured the last comer, in the hollow, solemn tones that prevented his voice being recognized as different from that of any of the other apparitions.

"Wal, thet's who it must be, I s'pose. But watch closely that he doesn't miss any uv ther signs. Ef he does, you know what ter do."

"We do, oh, Solon!"

"Good!"

Grant opened the door a little way, as he did before, and then, seeing a figure like those already in the room, allowed it to enter.

It marched to the middle of the room and went through the solemn hand-shaking ceremony with the ghost that had entered last before it. This, it appeared, was the rule of the Death-in-Life Band.

"Oh, Solon, what wouldst thou have me do?" mumbled the new-comer, in such a low tone that its words could hardly be distinguished.

Grant looked at the others for a moment, in hesitation. Then he answered:

"The band has done its work fer ther present. We are all goin' away now, ter be ready fer ther flit ter Evanston ter-night."

The new-comer only bowed, as it fixed its glassy eyes curiously on Grant. At least, it would have been curiously if there had been any expression in the orbs. The attitude indicated it.

The three ghosts had arranged the bags on a bench, so that they were all ready for removal. Then one of them examined the molds and raked the coals out of the furnace.

"Wal, ready?" asked Grant.

"We are!" murmured one of the figures.

"Come on, then."

"Hold, oh, Solon," said the shape that had come in immediately before the last one.

"What's ther matter now?" demanded Grant.

"Oh, Solon, I think it not well to leave our secret chamber untenanted. Let one of our sisters stay here on watch, so that when we come to-night we may know that no enemies have been here."

"Pretty good idea, that!" returned Grant. "But who will want ter stay down hyar fer eight or ten hours?"

"Let one sister stay half the time, and I will come then to allow her rest," answered

the same ghost, who seemed to be a sort of leader in the band by mere force of character.

"Which one of the sisters will stay?" asked Grant, looking at the three other apparitions.

"Oh, Solon, I will!" mumbled the last comer.

"That will I," would have been the correct form of words for a member of our band, oh, sister," corrected the last but one. "That will I," mumbled the last comer, accepting the correction humbly.

"All right. Now, let us go."

Grant spoke in an impatient tone, as if he were somewhat tired of the solemn tones and manners of his strange companions.

The three ghostly figures glided out of the room, and then Grant, with a wave of the hand to the shape left in possession of the room, also disappeared, closing the door behind him, and, to make all secure, locking it.

The solitary ghost stood for at least five minutes in one position, watching the door. At last it walked over to a chair near the furnace, and dropped into it, in a very weary and human-like fashion, at the same time emitting a chuckle suggestive of its enjoying itself very much, winding up with an exclamation in the richest of brogue, but without disturbing the ghastly look on its white, corpse-like face:

"Howly Moses! Oi'll choke if Oi don't get a chance to laugh! Dan McPhalin a ghost, be the powers, but this would make diversion if it wuz only in the ould counthry, so it w'u'd!"

And then the apparition burst into a "Haw! Haw! Haw!" not loud, but expressive of the greatest enjoyment, and all without moving a muscle of the livid face.

CHAPTER VIII.

SUE IN TROUBLE.

WHEN Wild Pete had shown Wintry Jim that bending pokers was a feat that might be performed by one man as well as another, he walked leisurely out of the house and in the direction of the corral.

He had learned what he wanted to know.

In the few minutes he had been out of the room Bob Grant had disappeared, and he knew perfectly well that he had gone down into the place below the house in which he (Wild Pete) had seen the terrible apparition.

"Everything is playing into my hands. I do believe," he muttered, as he reached the corral, where he saw Babe instructing Dan McPhelan in the art and mystery of throwing a lariat.

"Babe!"

As Wild Pete called to the young man a dark face looked around the corner of the fence and then disappeared. It was the face of Sam Sharkey.

It was only a moment that the face was shown, but that moment was enough for Wild Pete.

"Babe, I want ter speak ter yer fer jist er minute. Come along, Dan."

The two young men followed the detective, and strolled carelessly along toward the fence corner where Wild Pete had had a glimpse of Sam Sharkey.

"Yer know, Dan, thet when once yer hev er rope around er horse, yer must hold him thar. Make him understand thet you air ther boss. Ef yer don't you'll never be able ter do nothin' with him."

Dan nodded, although he couldn't understand why he had been led around the corner to hear this.

"An' Babe, whenever er feller is tryin' ter git ther drop on yer, look out fer him. D'yer see?"

Babe smiled. He knew Wild Pete better than did Dan McPhelan, and he understood at once that there was a double meaning in the detective's words.

They had been walking around the outside of the fence, to where a huge cottonwood overhung one portion of it at the corner.

"Another thing, Babe—and Dan, too—whenever yer see anything ez will make er good mark, allers blaze erway at it."

"Yes?" said Babe, wondering what was coming next.

"Now, boys, d'yer see thet tree thar?"

"Faith, Oi do," remarked Dan, "but it is a marruk as any man c'u'd hit, less he wuz blind."

"Precisely. But, do you see that little bit uv white stickin' out from ther side uv ther trunk, 'bout four feet from ther ground?"

"Yes."

"Wal, that's er pretty good mark at this distance. I'll see ef I kin bore er hole in it."

As he spoke the detective leveled his revolver and there was a loud bang almost simultaneously with his last word.

A howl of pain accompanied the bang, and Sam Sharkey darted out from behind the tree, holding his arm.

The piece of white that the detective had aimed at was a part of the sleeve of Sharkey's shirt—which was not exactly white, by the way, although light enough in color to warrant Wild Pete in calling it white for the purpose of illustration.

"Hello, Sam, what air yer doin' thar? I didn't hurt yer, did I?" asked Wild Pete, mockingly.

Sam Sharkey did not answer, but as he passed Wild Pete, holding his arm, which the detective knew was merely grazed, he scowled with absolutely devilish malignity.

"I don't like fellers watchin' and listenin' ter all ez I hev ter say, Sam. That's ther reason I rubbed the skin off yer arm. Keep out uv my way an' we'll be good friends."

Sam marched away, and then Wild Pete, changing his bantering manner for one of intense earnestness, said to Babe:

"The old man is down in ther crib under ther house, an' we hev ter see what he is after."

"How?"

"Thar is some other way inter thet place, I'm sure, an' I think I know wharerbouts it is?"

"So do I," observed Babe, quietly.

Wild Pete smiled. He had the greatest confidence in this young man, and he did not take the trouble to ask him what he suspected. He preferred to let events speak for themselves.

Less than a hundred yards from the corral was the entrance to a canyon that has been referred to in an earlier chapter.

The sharp rocks hid the entrance to the narrow passage, and one came upon it almost before he was aware after passing the spring from which Dan McPhelan had procured the bucket of water for Sue at his first introduction to that young lady.

Wild Pete walked swiftly to the canyon, with his two friends at his heels.

The path led up by a circuitous route until it reached a plateau above over a mile away.

One side was much higher than the other, so that after traversing half its length one found himself on a sort of rocky terrace from which it would be the easiest thing to tumble a thousand feet to the plain below.

But Wild Pete had no intention of going the whole length, or even half. He had noticed something in the short time he had been in this neighborhood that he thought would be a key to the problem he was trying to work out.

A number of loose rocks lay at the entrance to the canyon, over and around which it was hard work for even the sure-footed bronchos to make their way, as they had to sometimes, for this canyon was the most direct route to Evanston, the county seat of Uintah county.

They had just reached the entrance, and were only out of sight of the corral, when Wild Pete raised his hand to command silence. His quick ear had caught a sound that made his blood boil.

Cries of distress in a female voice!

"D'yer hear thet, boys?" he whispered, as his brows met over his dark eyes.

They listened for a moment, and then Dan, with a cry of rage, dashed forward in the direction of the cries, closely followed by Wild Pete and Babe Vincent.

"Howly mother o' Moses! It's Sue!" cried Dan, as he ran hither and thither among the rocks, still hearing the voice, but unable to find its owner.

The huge boulders scattered about made it hard work to progress, but Wild Pete had an idea that it would not be very difficult to get at Sue if he could only find the way. He knew she was very close, and he felt sure, from the muffled tones, that there was something to shut her off from the outside world.

Dan was running about wildly with his revolver in his hand, and it would have been a dangerous moment for the person that was

injuring the young girl could he have reached him.

But Wild Pete, although as deeply concerned as Dan, was not so excited that he could not think sensibly.

He had an almost phenomenal ear, and it led him directly to the spot from whence the sounds proceeded.

A great rock lay close to the wall of the canyon at one place, and Sue's cries seemed to come from the very center of this rock.

"Give us er hand hyar, boys," cried Wild Pete, seizing the top of the rock by one of its jagged points.

The two young men rushed to his assistance.

"Now, all three together!"

With a mighty pull, the three bent to their work, and away rolled the mass of rock, leaving a small opening, perhaps four feet square, exposed in the wall of the cliff.

The cries of Sue were now so plain that they were assured they had hit upon the right plan to rescue her.

"Oh, Marcia! Marcia! Let her go! Let her go! I didn't say a word! I didn't! I didn't!"

These exclamations were in Sue's voice, and there could be no doubt that she was in deadly terror, as well as pain.

"Z-r-r-r-r!" hissed another voice. But whether that of a man or woman, they could not tell. "I show you! Sac-r-r-r-e!"

"Oh! Marcia!"

"Hurry, boys. Come! This hyar is whar we take er hand in!" shouted Wild Pete, as, pistol in hand, he plunged through the small opening.

"Faith! I sh'u'd say so," responded Dan, following the detective so closely that he fell over his feet and hung almost on his back in the darkness.

Babe brought up the rear, and so close were the three together, that they all burst into a cavern at the end of the short passage simultaneously.

One glance was enough for Wild Pete.

Before either Pete or the person she called Marcia realized that there were others in the cave, the detective had pulled an old woman from Sue, upon whose chest she was kneeling, and had hurled her to the other end of the small apartment, while Dan gave his hand to the girl and lifted her to her feet.

"Sacré! Who vas you?" demanded the old woman, with a scowl.

"Be the powers, if it wuzn't for the captain there, Oi'd show you. You ould omad-haun!" cried Dan, as he kept his arm around Sue to support her until she should have recovered herself. "Niver moind, darlint, Oi'm wid yez now," he continued, to Sue, the excitement of the moment having made him forget to be bashful.

Meanwhile the old woman was looking from one to the other with an expression of baleful hatred.

She was very dark, with black hair and black, beady eyes that were never still for a moment. She was like a wild-cat at bay.

"Now, Sue, tell us all about it," said Wild Pete.

"Sacré! You open your mouth, von leetle beet, an' I keel you!" hissed the old woman.

"Pshaw! Never mind about her! She shall not hurt you," put in Babe Vincent.

"V'at?"

The old woman had drawn a dagger from her bosom and, with a howl, was upon Babe.

Fortunately for him, Wild Pete was watchful, and he had the dagger away before the hag could use it.

"Never mind! I do it yet!" muttered the old woman, as Babe held her hands behind her, with her face to the wall.

"I dare not speak!" whispered Sue, as she looked at the old woman with an expression that told how deep her fear was.

Wild Pete might have pressed her further, but just then he saw a crack in the wall by the side of the old woman that turned his thoughts in a new direction.

CHAPTER IX.

DAN JOINS THE BAND.

THE cave was lighted only by a candle stuck between two stones on a ledge half way up the wall, but its feeble light fell full upon the crack by the side of where the old woman stood, with her face to the wall,

securely in the by no means weak grasp of Babe.

"Jist what I thought," was the mental comment of Wild Pete, as he thrust his bowie-knife into the crack, and found that it widened with very slight pressure.

The girl was looking at him with an expression of apprehension very different from her usual fearless aspect. The old woman evidently possessed some mysterious influence over her that made her change almost her very nature.

"Sue, what is thar ther other side uv this hyer wall?" asked Wild Pete, suddenly.

"Sacré! You tell him an' I keel you!" howled the old woman, trying to tear herself out of the grasp of Babe Vincent.

The girl shook her head at Wild Pete, as a sign that she dare not speak.

Wild Pete saw how thoroughly cowed was the girl, and he forbore to press her further, the more so as he felt that he could find out for himself that which it was necessary for him to know.

A slight examination convinced him that there was a door at the back of the old woman, and that the crack in the wall was the edge of an ingeniously-made door.

Motioning to Babe to move the hag away, Wild Pete poked at the crack a little more with his knife, and had the satisfaction of finding a door which swung open easily on well-oiled hinges, suggesting that the owners of this secret retreat were always prepared for a hasty flight at any moment.

"Babe, you stay hyer. I'll take Dan with me. You kin hold thet old woman for a few minutes, I guess."

"Thet's what I kin, Pete," returned Babe, with a smile.

"Sue, you come, too."

The old woman moved impatiently, as if she would interfere, but Babe gave her a twitch, and at the same time Wild Pete took Sue's hand, and dragged her through the doorway, whether she would or not, with Dan McPhelan following closely.

They found themselves in a long passage, with many tortuous windings, and no light.

"Sue, do you know the way?" asked Pete.

"Yes."

"Go first, then, and lead us on."

The girl did as she was asked, and took Wild Pete's hand in hers, while Dan kept his hand on Pete's arm, that he might not lose him in the dark.

Not a word was spoken, as the three walked on and on in the pitch blackness.

"Hist!" whispered the girl, at last.

"What's the matter?"

"Some one ahead uv us."

"Whar?"

"Ther other side uv ther door."

"I can't see ther door."

"Mebbe not, but it's thar."

"What air we ter do, now?"

"I don't know. I've brought yer ez far ez I've ever been," answered the girl, and her tone would have convinced Wild Pete that she spoke the truth, even if he had not placed perfect trust in her from the first. He remembered what Babe Vincent had said—that Bob Grant had never taken her into his confidence with regard to the secret business he carried on.

"How air we ter get past thet door?"

"You mean ter go on, do yer?"

"We sart'inly do."

"It mought be dangerous."

"Possibly. But we can't stop fer thet," was Wild Pete's reply.

"Wal, I've never been past ther door, but I know how ter give ther signal. I—I hev heerd Marcia give it."

"What is it?"

"Three raps."

"Yes."

"Then thar will be an answer of six raps."

"Wal?"

"Then you give one loud bang, an' ther door will open."

"Wal?"

"You will find everything black dark, but some one will take yer hand, and—and—Thet's all I know."

"Wal, Sue, when I've been through ther business, I guess I'll be able ter tell yer more about it," was the remark of Wild Pete to this observation of Sue's.

"Air yer goin' in now? What erbout

Babe an' Marcia? I dassen't go back by myself to them, an' I can't go on. They would kill me sure."

"They? Who?"

"I don't know," answered the girl, with a shudder.

"Great snakes! They hev this hyer girl scared ter death," muttered Wild Pete to himself.

He thought for a moment, and then made up his mind.

"Dan?"

"That's me name."

"You'll hev ter go in hyar, an' see what's goin' on."

"Faith, Oi don't care phwat Oi do, ef it's to help you an' the young leddy," answered Dan, gallantly.

"All right. Go in, see all you can, without giving yerself or me away, an' ez soon ez yer know what ther caper is, git out and come ter me. I won't be far away. Ef yer git in er tight place, why, shoot an' shoot quick. Yer may not only do er good thing by rubbin' out some fellers thet er no pertic'ler good on airth, but we may hear ther shots an' lend yer er hand. See?"

"Faix, thin, Oi don't. Oi can't see anything. But Oi can hear, an' thet's as good, Oi'm thinking."

"Quite ez good," laughed Wild Pete. "Go on. Give ther signal. We will wait hyar an' be ready in case thar's trouble. We'll wait fer ten er fifteen minutes anyhow."

Dan did not waste any more time in talk. He felt his way to the door and bestowed the three raps. Back came the answer—six taps, in couples. Then Dan responded with the full weight of his anything but light fist, and a draught of cold air told that the door was open. He stepped forward, with hand outstretched, and it was clasped by another hand, that felt strangely unnatural, as if the skin were dead, although the muscles within were like steel-traps.

"Faix, Oi don't loike this!" thought Dan, but fortunately, he had presence of mind enough to prevent his making an audible remark.

Before he comprehended what was happening to him he felt a garment of some kind thrown over his head, and his arm was drawn through sleeves that almost covered his hands. Then gloves were placed on his hands, and a mask that covered him to the shoulders pulled over his head and face.

"Sister of the Death-in-Life," growled a hollow voice in his ear, "you are now one of the band."

"Moses!" ejaculated Dan, and he was horror-stricken by the discovery that his own voice sounded hollow, like that of the mysterious being who had just spoken to him. He understood at once that it was the mask muffling his voice that caused this phenomenon, however, and devoted his attention to the next proceeding of his unseen, in comprehensible companion.

Wild Pete had already, in a few words, given him to understand that there was a gang of counterfeiters at work in the neighborhood, but had not told him that he knew Bob Grant, the ostensible cattle-raiser, to be at the head of the company.

The stranger now took Dan by the hand, and in a few short sentences instructed him how to behave when he met another of the band, so as to assure him that he was safe.

Dan was in a sad state of mystification, but he had determined to help Wild Pete in every way possible, and indeed had made up his mind to become his assistant rather than that of Bob Grant. He had come to the ranch only on the advice of a fellow-countryman he had met in Cheyenne, and cared little what he did so long as there was adventure and enough to eat and drink and be merry. He was a thorough Irishman in these respects, and in two others—he liked to fight and make love.

Thou understandest now, by the word of Solon, that thou art one of the Death-in-Life?" asked the mysterious one, at the conclusion of the instructions.

"Oi do."

"Tis well."

There was a rustling as the stranger moved away, and then a flood of light entered the chamber as a door was opened, showing another room, in which the principal objects were a full-length mirror, with a lamp and

reflector on either side. Dan looked at his companion by the light that streamed in and almost dropped in amazement as he saw a tall, sheeted figure, with the face of a dead woman, glaring at him through glassy eyes, from amid a mass of heavy black hair that hung over its shoulders, making its livid face more ghastly than it would otherwise have been.

The shape comprehended the reason of Dan's shrinking movement, and stretching one of its long, skinny, dead hands, pointed to the mirror.

Dan followed the direction of the finger, and then, as he looked into the glass, he saw that the figure advancing toward it was a counterpart of that which had been speaking to him.

"Howly Moses!" he groaned. "Hev Oi turned into a ghost, too?"

He raised his right hand. The reflection in the mirror raised his left. He nodded his head, and shook himself from side to side. All his movements were duplicated in the mirror.

By this time he saw through the mystery, and he laughed under his ghostly mask so heartily that his companion was afraid he was in a fit, and put out her hand to, support him.

"What is it, sister?"

"Sister!" muttered Dan. "Ow, this wull kill me intirely!" Then, aloud: "It ain't nothing, oh, Solon!"

Re-assured, the sister rapped on another door, that Dan had been unable to see on account of the darkness, and when the answering signal came, told Dan to give the loud bang and enter.

Obedying instructions, he entered the work-room where the two sisters and Bob Grant were busy over the counterfeit money, as has already been related in chapter seven.

CHAPTER X.

WILD PETE'S AVENGING SHADOW.

It is midnight after the time of the events narrated in the preceding chapters.

There is no moon, and the sighing of the light breeze through the top branches of the gigantic cottonwoods and the hemlocks in front of the ranch is the only sound that disturbs the stillness.

A splendid night for deeds that must not be known to any save those concerned in them.

No lights are to be distinguished in the house, and for all that can be seen, all the inmates might be sound asleep.

Hark! What's that?

Hardly distinguishable by save a very alert ear, the tramp of unshod hoofs on the soft earth, making just the faintest jar.

There are more horses than one, as a plainsman could tell in a moment provided he could hear the sounds at all.

Nothing is to be seen, but there is an indefinable hint of a presence, as surely as if men and horses were moving about in the glare of noonday.

The pit-a-pat of horses' feet comes nearer, and now, if any one had been hiding in the gloom of the veranda in front of the ranch, he would have been convinced that there were at least three horses pawing the ground within a hundred yards of him.

Suddenly a man emerges from the shadow of the veranda and looks into the thick gloom before him.

"Babe!" he whispers.

It is the voice of Wild Pete.

No answer is returned to his call, but another man comes forward and stands by his side.

"Babe, are ther horses ready?"

"Yes. They're jist 'round ther corner uv ther house, on ther other side from whar these varmints air crawlin' out."

"Good! I'll try what thet stallion kin do at er pinch. Bob said ez I wuz ter hev any horse I wanted, didn't he?"

"Yes. He give orders ter Sharkey afore you come."

Wild Pete emitted a silent chuckle.

"Yes, an' my dear friend, Sam Sharkey, thinks now ez I hev thet black stallion, I'll break my neck, I s'pose. Wal, I'd rather hev thet horse than any other in ther outfit. I'm goin' ter hev thet horse if I kin buy him, when all this yer trouble is over. I've named him already, so ez I kin hev something

ter call him. A horse soon l'arns ter answer ter his name."

"What d'yer call him?"

"Diablo."

"A good name for him, too, fer ef ever thar wuz ther devil in er horse, it's in thet black stallion."

This dialogue had been carried on in such low tones that it could not have been heard a yard away, for the two men did not know who might be on the watch besides themselves.

Now the hoof-beats come nearer, although the horses are evidently being walked so that they shall not make more noise than necessary.

"Pete, we air gittin' them, sure," murmured Babe, in a tone that evinced exultation over the success of their scheme, whatever it was.

"Yes, I hope we'll ketch them red-handed. That's what I'm after, my boy. I don't want ter hev ter waste er lot uv time gittin' up proof ag'in' 'em, when once I hev 'em. Else I could hev taken 'em 'most any time, on mere s'picion, don't yer see," answered Wild Pete.

Wild Pete and Babe had been waiting on the veranda for at least an hour, having quietly made their way out of the bunk-room, where the other men of the outfit were still sleeping the sleep of exhaustion, with no idea that two of their number were engaged in some enterprise that had nothing to do with raising cattle or running in wild horses.

Their eyes were now pretty well accustomed to the gloom, and they could just make out three figures of human beings by the side of as many horses making their way toward the canyon already described.

"Guess they are goin' ter load up at thet end uv ther crib, eh, Pete?" whispered Babe.

"Uv course. They couldn't do it hyar in ther house."

"Wonder what they'll do with ther old woman?"

"Leave her to watch ther place below, I s'pose. Thet seems ter be her reg'lar job. She went inside when we let her go thet time, ye know."

"Yes. Ther old rapsallion! Ginger! Wuzn't she mad!" said Babe, as he thought of the old woman's rage. "And wouldn't she hev made it hot fer ther poor girl ef we hed left her down thar?"

"Sue is all right, I guess," remarked the detective. "She went ter her own room airly in ther evening, an' I s'pose she's thar yet."

"I hope so," responded Babe. "Hello!"

He wheeled round quickly and had his revolver pressed against the chest of another man who had stolen up behind him and placed his hand on his shoulder.

Wild Pete knew instinctively that there was some one else there, and he, too, had his gun in his hand simultaneously with the exclamation of Babe.

"Hould yer whist!" whispered a voice they both recognized, and the guns were put away in an instant, while Pete patted Dan McPhelan on the back with a feeling of relief that he was anything but ashamed of.

"Dan! Whar did yer come from?"

"Och, thin, it's meself as has the toime, by-the-bye. Faith, Oi began ter think Oi wuz gwine to spind the rist uv me loife oonderground wid the spooks, an' divils an' things. Bad scran to thim! Oi am a dacent b'ye, an' Oi don't want to be a ghost widout benefit uv clargy an' no blissin' on me doings."

Wild Pete understood that Dan McPhelan was thoroughly in earnest in his bewailings, although he expressed them in a comical manner, and he did not press him to tell him what he had seen in the underground regions of Bob Grant's ranch. All he wanted to know was the plans of the gang, so far as Dan had been able to discover them.

"Ah, thin, they're here to go away to Evanston, an' they hev a lot of goold thot they are goin' to git rid uv down there to some spalpeen as helps thim. Oi was to go wid thim, but Oi gave 'em the slip jist as they got all the stoof out. They think Oi'm somewhere about. Bob tould me to keep away from the main party, so as not to tract 'tintion. Faith Oi won't tract no 'tintion, will Oi?"

Dan began to shake in an alarming man-

ner, suggesting that he would break out into a peal of laughter if he were not restrained. So Wild Pete clapped his hand over his mouth, with a whispered caution:

"Ef yer make any noise, we air all gone up."

"All roight! Oi won't say nothin', but, be me sowl, whin Oi tink uv them fellows awaitin' fer me, Oi feel as if Oi sh'd shplit."

By this time the sound of hoofs had almost died away, but now the rap and ring of them on a hard substance told that they had reached the rocky pathway of the canyon, and that the speed had become increased from a walk to a gallop.

"Thar's no time ter lose," whispered Wild Pete, as he left the veranda, and moved around to the side of the house, where Babe Vincent had told him the horses were.

"Whar's your horse, Dan?"

"Faith, Oi hev him. An' a ma'ne koin'd uv animal he is. But Oi don't care for that, so long as he can gallop."

"Thet's right, Dan. Yer needn't keer fer anything else 'bout him," said Babe. "I hev a creeter uv 'bout ther same stamp, and Wild Pete hez thet black brute ez he calls Diablo, so we air all pretty well fixed fer horseflesh."

Silently all three mounted, and walked their horses around to the front of the ranch, while they made up their minds as to their mode of procedure.

"We'd better keep jist behind them until they git out uv ther canyon. We couldn't do anything among them thar rocks. They could git away from us easily, an' we'd hev all this hyer trouble over ag'in," whispered Wild Pete, as he drew Diablo over to the side of Babe's wiry mustang.

"Jist ez you say," returned Babe. "You're ther doctor."

"Come on, then, but slow an' 'ithout any more racket than yer hev ter make."

Wild Pete went first, and his two companions followed silently, the horses, with the sagacity of their race, seeming to understand that they were required to move with secrecy, and seconding the efforts of their riders with an almost human intelligence. Even Diablo seemed to be tamed down so thoroughly that he obeyed the slightest hint from Wild Pete's knee or hand.

A few minutes' ride brought them to the rocks that marked the entrance to the canyon, and as they got around the corner they could hear the hoof-beats of the party they were pursuing, but a long way ahead.

"They're makin' good time," muttered Wild Pete, "but we'll ketch them when we want them."

"It wouldn't do ter gallop now, would it?" whispered Babe.

"No. They'd hear us on this hard road. Jist walk erlong. When they git out uv this on ter the plateau, we kin go ahead. We hev ter s'prise them."

"Faix, it's meself thot's su'prised so far," rumbled Dan, under his breath. "Indade, Oi niver thought me own mither's son 'ud iver be in sich a fix as this, wid a revolver 'round me middle an' a chance of bein' shot afore Oi git to me journey's ind. Niver moind. It's all divarsion anyhow, an' if Oi'm kilt Oi'll hov the foon of it."

Slowly the party crept on. They were now in the very middle of the chasm, a thousand feet above the plain they had left, and making their way toward another at the other end of the rocky pass.

The great cliffs arose on either side, in jagged walls, with ledges and knobs that suggested ambush for the Indians that a few years before had made this place their stamping ground, and in which every white man took his life in his hands.

The night had been very dark so far, but now a few faint gleams of moonlight touched the top of the mountains and penetrated into the abyss through which Wild Pete and his companions were making their way.

"Thet makes ther darkness visible," muttered Wild Pete, "but it won't git too light. Thar'll only be er half moon anyway, and ther air is somewhat hazy, so we'll be all right, ef them varmints do take it inter ther heads to reconnoiter."

The party went on now with more caution, for they had lost the sound of the people they were pursuing, and they had no

intention of walking into an ambush, if it could be helped.

But while they were looking ahead for possible enemies, they had not given much attention to what might be going on behind them.

And yet there was danger there, too.

On a broncho that made its way over the jagged rocks with the sure step of a goat, came a man, with a set purpose gleaming in his deep-set eyes that glowered from beneath overhanging brows.

The broncho was not following the path on which Wild Pete and his friends were riding, but was making its way along a ledge several hundred feet above, its rider evidently being thoroughly acquainted with the route.

Occasionally the horse had to leap over a small opening, where a misstep would have hurled him and the man on his back into the canyon and smashed both to pieces. But the misstep was never made, and the horse moved along with as much certainty as if he were merely cantering over the plain.

The man drew a revolver from his belt as the moonlight gave him a view of the dim outlines of the men below, in the valley.

"How easily I could pick him off," he hissed. "But it wouldn't do; I never could git away from hyar, an' thet thar Babe, ef I do call him er kid, would lay me out sure, ef I didn't manage ter git ther drop on him at ther same time, which I could never do. No. I'll wait erwhile."

Sam Sharkey, for he it was, replaced his pistol in his scabbard, and rode on, keeping further back from the edge of the path, as the moonlight became stronger, but never allowing Wild Pete to get out of his sight.

It was well for Sam Sharkey that he did not carry out his intention of firing upon Wild Pete.

A few yards behind him, hiding behind a huge rock, with the bridle of her mustang carelessly over her arm, was a girl, whose revolver was pointed straight at the head of Sam Sharkey, and whose finger on the trigger only needed a decisive movement on his part to be endowed with motion that would have sent Sharkey rolling to the bottom of the canyon, a corpse.

"Ther durned coyote!" muttered Sue, as she balanced her silver-mounted revolver in her hand with the ease and dexterity of one used to handling the weapon. "He ain't got ther pluck ter kill er man even when he hez the dead drop on him! What's such er feller good fer, anyhow?"

CHAPTER XI.

AT CLOSE QUARTERS.

LET us go to the party that Wild Pete is following with such pitiless pertinacity.

There are three people—two men and a woman.

At least, it is to be presumed that the third person is a woman, simply because one of her companions addresses her as "Old Gal!" Otherwise there is nothing to distinguish her from any of the bull-whackers with whom she associates.

Her dress is that of a man, and she sits her horse man-fashion, astride, with a sure seat, and a general air of being thoroughly at home in the saddle. Her revolver hangs in a belt on her right side, and her lariat is thrown over the horn of her high saddle on the left.

All three wear black masks that effectually conceal their identity, and each carries across his saddle a bag that is evidently well loaded with some heavy thing.

It is not necessary to keep the reader in the dark as to who the three persons are. They are Bob Grant, Wintry Jim and Marcia, the old woman who, as we have seen, is one of the Death-in-Life gang, and acts as the guardian of the secret entrance to the crib at the opening of the canyon.

"Wal, I guess we got cl'ar away this time," says Bob Grant, turning in his saddle; and looking behind him, in a vain effort to pierce the gloom of the canyon.

"I dunno nothin' 'bout it," was the surly response of Wintry Jim. "Ask Marcia."

"Parbleu! How do I know?" grunted the old woman, giving her horse a vicious kick with her heel, upon which, fortunately for him, she wore no spur.

"They all fooled yer, didn't they?" laughed Wintry Jim.

"Sicre! I git even with them yet. You see!"

The three rode on in silence for some minutes. They were on a hazardous expedition, for they knew that detectives were on their track, and it was imperative that they should get all the spurious coin they had safely into the hands of the Evanston agent, whoever he might be, as soon as possible.

"Whar is thet durned Wild Pete, Wintry? Hev you any idea?" asked Bob Grant.

"Ef I didn't know ez he wuz safe at ther ranch, I should be looking after him. You kin bet on thet," replied Wintry Jim.

"Thet new feller, what talks with er brogue ez you could chip inter splinters. He's all right, I hope."

"Course he is. He come mighty near bein' swung ter er tree ther very fu'st thing when he got inter this part uv ther country. Ther boys got it inter ther thick heads thet he had been liftin' ther horse he rode, an' ef it hadn't been fer Wild Pete, I'm durned ef ther young feller wouldn't hev died with his boots on right thar."

"Haw, haw!" laughed Bob Grant, relaxing his habitual sternness for the moment. "Thet's er good one. An' ther feller came ter join ther gang, too."

It will be seen from this little conversation that Bob Grant, and his lieutenant, Wintry Jim, were not quite so well informed as to Dan McPhelan's intentions as they thought they were.

"Wal, now fer er gallop across ther plain. We'll soon be thar."

They emerged from the canyon, just as the moon rose a little above the mountains, and Bob Grant put spurs to his horse as he spoke.

Wintry Jim followed the example of his chief, but Marcia, with the perversity peculiar to her, lagged behind and tried to pierce the dimness of the canyon through the eye-holes of her crape mask.

"Come on, back thar!" yelled Bob Grant, and the old woman, as if satisfied that all was right, gave her horse a cut with her quirt, and was soon up to her two companions.

Marcia was a pretty smart old lady, but even she could be fooled sometimes. If she had waited a minute or two longer, the chances are that she would have heard the distant hoof-beats of horses in the canyon, where the rocky ground gave forth the sound with distinctness, in spite of the care of the riders.

Bob Grant and his two followers were dashing over the plateau, in a comfortable frame of mind, feeling satisfied that they would reach their destination in Evanston without being disturbed, when Wild Pete, Babe and Dan McPhelan arrived at the opening of the canyon, and prepared for a run across the plain.

They had been entirely unaware of the presence of Sam Sharkey and Sue, and were thinking only of how they could best overhaul the rascals they were pursuing.

"Dan," said Wild Pete, "I've been thinking 'bout this hyar business, an' I guess you'll hev ter take er little more risk."

"Oi'm agreeable. Phwat is it?"

"Bob Grant thinks ez you air all right, don't he?"

"Yis. But Oi don't know 'bout the ould woman. Howsumever, Oi don't tink she'd know me ag'in. She didn't git a good look at me, an' Oi'll tek chances on her, so Oi wull."

"Good! Then you ride ahead an' j'ine ther party an' be ready ter help when we git up ter yer. Savy?"

"Oi do."

"All right. Ride ez ef Old Nick wuz at yer heels, an' we'll be close behind yer."

"Faith, Oi tink Ould Nick wuz forninst me, inst'id uv ahind me," chuckled Dan, who thought nothing of peril so long as he could have what he termed divarsion.

Dan McPhelan did not waste any time in talking. He saw what was required of him, and the way he made his horse get over the plain was a refreshing sight to Wild Pete, who was burning to get his hands on the leader of the gang he had come so far to secure.

"Babe," said Wild Pete, as Dan disappeared in the midst of the early morning

that is always to be noticed in the summer in such climates as that of Wyoming.

"Well!"

"I spect we'll hev ter bring this hyar thing ter an issue mighty soon now."

"Good thing, too, Pete."

"Hope Dan won't make no mistake."

"I don't think he will. He don't scare at nothin'. He showed thet when Sam Sharkey an' ther rest uv ther boys wuz goin' ter swing him ter the cottonwood. Durned ef I ever saw er feller show more pluck. Thet wuz ther reason I jumped in ter save him."

"It wuz good uv yer, Babe," was Wild Pete's comment.

"Wonder whar thet Sharkey is? I didn't see him after you took er rise out uv him at the corral," remarked Babe.

"Oh, he's all right enough at ther ranch, I guess," replied Wild Pete, carelessly.

But Sam Sharkey was not at the ranch, as the reader knows.

If Wild Pete had thought to turn his horse's head around and ride back quickly a few hundred yards, he would have found Sam Sharkey riding along on his trail, with a dogged determination on his face that meant murder.

Back a few hundred yards further, Wild Pete would doubtless have been surprised to find no less a person than Sue, with her silver-mounted revolver in its scabbard at her saddle, in regular cowboy fashion, ready for instant use. Sue was riding on her own saddle, however, which differed from that of the old woman, in that it was made for a woman. She wore a neat riding-habit that reached to her feet when she was on the ground, and she sat on her horse now as gracefully as any darling of society to be met with in Central Park during the fashionable hour, and with infinitely more security.

Thus the strange procession moved on, each party being unaware of a pursuer, and all except the first intent on catching those in front of them.

"Come on, Babe! Now or never," cried Wild Pete, when Dan had been out of sight for perhaps ten minutes.

"All right, Pete. Let her go."

Wild Pete gave Diablo a touch with his quirt, and the animal took a leap forward as if he were going to take things in his own hands again. But an admonitory tug of the bridle and a word from Wild Pete, "Steady, boy!" brought him up into a stride that covered an immense stretch, but did not give Wild Pete trouble to control, and the rider smiled to himself as he noted how thoroughly he had tamed the spirit of the fierce brute. Diablo acknowledged his master, and his master was Wild Pete.

Babe dashed after his companion, and the two men rode on in silence, but both keeping their horses to a high rate of speed.

"Look out," whispered Wild Pete, suddenly, as he reined up Diablo so powerfully as to pull him on his haunches.

"What's up?"

"Thar they are!"

"Whar?"

"Jist ahead."

"I don't see 'em."

"They are thar, anyhow."

These remarks had been exchanged in short, excited whispers. Although Babe Vincent spoke the truth when he said he could not see the enemy, he had no doubt they were there, because he knew he could trust Wild Pete's quick sense of seeing and hearing.

"Thar's Dan's voice," went on Wild Pete. "Durn thet feller! I b'lieved he'd hev ter talk ef every word wuz ter cost him five years uv his life."

"Thet's so," acquiesced Babe. "Shall we make er dash at 'em?"

"Easy, Babe," warned Wild Pete. "Let's try an' see how ther land lies, fu'st."

"Whatever you say."

Wild Pete was right in his supposition that they were nearly upon Bob Grant and his party, and he had distinguished the voice of Dan McPhelan raised in a growl about a rock against which it seemed his horse had stumbled, and which brought forth a growl of remonstrance from one of his companions.

But Bob Grant was pushing on at a goodly rate, and the momentary stoppage of Wild Pete and Babe had thrown them behind again.

"Let's get on at er good lope, Babe, so ez ter overhaul them, ef we kin. An' remember, I don't want ter kill 'em. Let's take 'em erlive, ef possible."

"Wall!"

"But—we must take them," added Wild Pete, significantly.

"I onderstand," responded Babe.

"Come on, then."

Diablo, with his long stride, and the horse that Babe rode, active and strong, could cover a great deal of ground in a short time, especially on a level surface, such as this plateau presented, with the short grass not offering any impediment, and therefore it soon became a race between them and Bob Grant's party that was rapidly resolving itself into a victory for the pursuers.

Grant's party were riding abreast, spreading out over a considerable space—in open order, to use a military phrase—so as to maintain the best possible watch and prevent a surprise, if possible. Although Bob Grant felt reasonably certain that his movements had not been watched by the enemy, it was his nature to be always on guard.

Next to him was Wintry Jim. Then came Marcia, and beyond her, was Dan McPhelan.

Thus Bob Grant was on the extreme right, and Dan McPhelan at the other end of the line.

Dan had provided himself with a black mask when he had discarded the white robes and death mask of the ghost, and so far as appearance went, it would have been impossible to distinguish him from either of his male companions, or even Marcia.

A slight rushing noise warned the party that they were approaching a running stream, and Bob Grant expressed satisfaction thereat.

"Thar's ther Bar River," he muttered, "an' I'm glad uv it. We air not far from Evanston now."

"How air we goin' ter cross?" asked Wintry Jim. "Thar ain't no ford around hyar, and we can't git er ferry, even ef we wanted ter use one, at this hyar time in ther mornin'."

"Ferry, nothin'," growled Bob. "We'll hev ter swim it."

Taken up with the discussion of the way of crossing the river, Wintry Jim and Bob Grant were temporarily off their guard.

They were suddenly brought to themselves by a wild whoop, and the dashing down upon them of two horsemen, each of whom had his face partially covered by a huge silk handkerchief tied over his mouth, while his broad slouch hat covered his forehead down to his eyes. For the rest, their dress was that of ordinary cowboys, such as was worn by nine-five per cent, of the people in that part of Wyoming.

Without articulate words, the whooping pair fairly flung themselves upon Bob Grant's party.

The biggest of the two men, who sat a beautiful black horse, had his right arm around Bob Grant's neck, and was garroting him in the most approved fashion, while his companion, who had tried to rope Wintry Jim, but whose lariat had become entangled in the horn of his saddle, was wrestling with him and trying to drag him from his horse.

So sudden had been the onslaught that neither Bob Grant or Wintry Jim had had a chance to draw their weapons, and they were therefore compelled to depend upon their muscle.

Bob Grant was a cool fellow, and he realized at once that he was as a baby in the hands of his gigantic assailant as to whose identity he had a strong suspicion, in spite of the disguising handkerchief.

He gave one pull to try and get away, and then did not waste his strength any further in futile efforts to break away. All he could do was to prevent Wild Pete choking him.

Wild Pete was bracing himself for a final effort that would bring Bob Grant completely into his power, and enable him to adjust the handcuffs that he had in his pocket, when a lariat whirled over his head, and pinning his arms to his sides, dragged him from the back of Diablo, and stretched him on the ground, helpless.

He heard three shots, a shouting, in which

he could distinguish more than one female voice, and then a tremendous blow on his head rendered him unconscious.

CHAPTER XII.

THE ESCAPE.

DAN MCPHELAN had been riding quietly along, at his end of the line, waiting for some sign of action from his friends behind.

"Faith, it's toime they wuz comin', it seems to me," he thought. "P'raps they hev lost us in the dark."

But he soon found that they had not lost him.

Although he was actually thinking about Wild Pete and Babe, and expecting them to catch up every moment, they accomplished the maneuver before he was aware of their presence.

So, when the whoop broke the stillness of the early morning, and Bob Grant and Wintry Jim found themselves beset from behind ere they had time to make a movement in self-defense, Dan was taken by surprise as much as they.

But he was not a young man of slow action.

He realized in a moment what had taken place, and his plan was formed and executed in a flash.

He had the dear old lady, Marcia, in his strong hands, and had torn away from her the dagger she was about to plunge into Babe Vincent before she could accomplish her deadly purpose.

"Arrah! You are a darlint! Faith, Oi'd loike yez for a swateheart av yez was not so fond of using a knife, so Oi w'u'd."

"Sacre!" hissed the hag.

"Och! Ye are a wicked gurril to talk loike thot. You'll make yourself disloiked, an' thin phwat will you do?"

This banter made Marcia fairly wild with anger, and she struggled and fought with the young Irishman so that he had his hands full to prevent her using the dagger.

The horses had pulled up and remained quite still, taking no cognizance of the struggle going on between their riders. But Dan saw that he would have a better chance on foot, and he slipped off his horse, and at the same time dragged the old woman down, too.

"Thar, alannah! Now you are comfortable. Oi beg your pardon for pulling off your mask, but faith Oi wanted to see the face uv me swateheart, so Oi did."

In the mean time the struggle between the other four men had been going on with increasing desperation.

"Bad seran to 'em! Oi must help in that scrimmage, sure," muttered Dan.

He dragged the knife out of the old woman's hands and threw it far away, out of reach, and then, taking the lariat from the saddle-bow of Marcia's broncho, took three or four turns around her with it, and threw her upon the ground, helpless and raving.

As he did so there was a whoop behind him, and a man whom he recognized on the instant as Sam Sharkey sent his lariat whirling over his head and caught with it the form of Wild Pete, throwing him to the ground. Then, following up his advantage, Sharkey swept past Dan on his mustang, and, after firing three shots at him, that missed, dealt him a tremendous blow on the back of his head as he passed with the butt of his revolver.

"Ow, the murtherin' villain!" yelled Dan.

He ran toward Sharkey, but Sam was on horseback and Dan afoot, so that the Irishman had no chance of catching him.

Dan drew his revolver, however, and blazed away at the fellow with such good aim, that he sent a bullet through the broad, flapping brim of his hat, but did not manage to blow his brains out.

"More's the pity!" grumbled Dan, who was perfectly cool, notwithstanding all the bustle of the fight.

Babe had found a foe worthy of the best he could do in the person of Wintry Jim. That white-headed gentleman was a giant of strength, in spite of the fact that he was not particularly big.

His sinewy arms were like steel springs, and he was as firm on his feet as a rock.

Babe Vincent had the advantage when he took hold of Wintry Jim in the first place, but he soon found that his advantage would not avail him much in a protracted struggle.

Babe held his antagonist with a firm hand, and prevented his turning around, as was evidently his intention. But Wintry Jim was a veteran in the management of horses, having been on the plains for years. Before Babe Vincent came within the shadow of the Rockies

"Leggo my neck!" he hissed.

Babe only held the tighter.

"Leggo, or—"

Wintry Jim finished his sentence by tugging with all his power to get away, but Babe was ready for it, and held with a death grip.

Now Wintry Jim tried new tactics.

He was bound to get away from this man, whoever he might be, for, although he had a pretty good idea that the big man who had just been knocked senseless by Sam Sharkey was Wild Pete, he had not recognized Babe Vincent through his disguise.

The horse that Wintry Jim sat was a well trained broncho that he had ridden at intervals throughout the season, and that would obey any movement of his rider.

Upon his horse Wintry Jim saw that he must depend.

Bracing himself firmly in his saddle, he managed to turn half around, putting spurs to the sides of his broncho at the same instant.

The result was what he had hoped.

The horse gave a sudden jerk, that pulled Babe from his saddle, although he still clung, with a desperate clutch, at the neck of his foe.

"Durn yer! Leggo!" gurgled Wintry Jim, for Babe's fingers were on his throat and it was hard for him even to get his breath.

It was of no use his asking Babe to release him. Only force was likely to make him do that.

Wintry Jim sent his horse full tilt toward the river that was tumbling along rather swiftly within a few hundred yards of the spot where the struggle was taking place.

"Look out, thar!" cried a female voice that Babe recognized as that of Sue, although he expected nothing less than to hear it at that time and place.

He tried to see what was going on behind him, for it had been steadily growing lighter during the progress of the fight, and it was possible to distinguish forms as large as people and horses at some distance now.

That curiosity of Babe's cost him his prisoner—if Wintry Jim could thus be called.

Wintry Jim had set his horse straight at the river, and at this moment, when Babe was trying to look over his shoulder, the horse gathered his feet under him, and with one mighty spring, reached far out into the river.

The sudden contact with cold water, the jerk, and the fact that his attention was distracted from the movements of his foe for the time being, were too much for Babe Vincent.

He and Wintry Jim's horse began to swim at the same moment, but in opposite directions.

"Durn yer pictur! Take this!" yelled Wintry Jim, who had managed to draw his pistol and hold it out of the water as his horse plunged into the river.

He blazed away at Babe's head, but the young fellow ducked just in time. Again Wintry Jim took aim, and would perhaps have reached his mark and there ended Babe's earthly career, but a bullet struck his pistol just before he pulled the trigger, and knocked it into the river, as a mocking female voice echoed across the water:

"Not this time. Some other day!"

Babe Vincent was a strong swimmer, and he soon regained the bank of the river, and, regardless of his wet clothes, went to Wild Pete, who, dazed by the blow on his head, but gradually recovering consciousness, was sitting up, trying to recall himself.

"All right, Pete?" asked Babe, cheerily.

"Eh?"

"I ask yer if ye'r all right. Thet wuz a ugly crack on ther head ez thet thar scall-wag give yer, but he couldn't lay yer out altogether, I guess."

"Who?" asked Pete, faintly.

"Say, you fellers don't seem able ter do

nothin'. I'll tell yer. Go over ter Marcia thar and feel in her side pocket. You'll find some licker, I guess, an' it'll be jist ther right thing fer yer pal now, I'm thinkin'."

This advice came from Sue, who had ridden up to the spot and was looking down at Wild Pete and Babe with considerable contempt for their surgical and medical knowledge.

Babe did not need a second hint. He strode over to the old woman, who was still lying on the ground, with several feet of rope around her, while Dan McPhelan kept guard over her.

"I want thet flask she hez in her pocket," said Babe.

"Thot's all roight. Tek anything she has. Faix, she's my prisoner; an' Oi'll give yer anything she hez in her pockets, so Oi wull," said Dan, in a burst of generosity.

The flask was found, and a pull at its contents restored Wild Pete to himself.

He arose and mounted Diablo, who stood perfectly still beside him, and looked toward the river.

"Babe."

"Wal?"

"They've got away."

"Of course they hev, but it's only fer er time."

"It may be er long time."

"Not ef we go right aften 'em."

"Hello! Thar's three uv 'em now," cried Wild Pete, in surprise.

"Wal, considerin' ther third feller wuz ther one ez give yer thet crack on ther skull, I should think yer ought ter realize thet."

"I never saw him. He knocked the senses out uv me afore I had time ter make his acquaintance."

"Thet's so. But he's a friend uv yours."

"Who?"

"Sam Sharkey."

Wild Pete's brow grew black as night.

"Um! I'll hev ter kill Sam Sharkey, I kin see."

"Guess yer will, ef ye'r ever goin' ter hev any peace in this yer section."

This dialogue was interrupted by a cry from Dan McPhelan.

"Ow! Ther murtherin' omadhaun! Look out for her!"

The galloping of a horse explained Dan McPhelan's cry, and before they had time to interfere, Marcia, with Dan's lariat still around her, but considerably loosened by her struggles, was astride of her broncho, and making for the river.

Wild Pete had not sufficiently recovered from the blow on his head, to join in pursuit, but he cried to Babe to intercept her.

Babe dashed after the old woman, and had almost reached her, when his horse stumbled and threw him headlong into the river, for the second time that morning.

With a laugh of triumph, Marcia had set her horse into the stream and was swimming it across, while Babe was still floundering in the water, as mad as a wet hen.

CHAPTER XIII.

A BOY WITH A GUN.

It was almost broad daylight, as Bob Grant, and his three companions (for Sam Sharkey had been perforce admitted to the party, although he had had no opportunity of taking the regular oath of secrecy yet,) stopped at a respectable-looking house on the outskirts of the city of Evanston, and riding to the rear, found a goodly-sized stable that Bob Grant opened with a key that he carried.

All four took their horses into the stable and closed the door.

The bags of coin were unloaded and dropped into a hole in the floor that was revealed by lifting a board concealed under the thick carpet of sawdust that covered the whole floor.

"Now, boys, go out one by one, and separate, but be back in two hours, in the house, and not in ther stable. Marcia, you'd better go to your sister's and git inter women's clothes ag'in. Ther others will want ter git dry things, too."

"I feel like er drowned rat," grumbled Sharkey.

"Thet's so. Wintry Jim, you'd better take him ter yer own crib an' git him fixed up. I'll stay in ther house hyar."

Wintry Jim had kept his mask on till now,

but he took it off as he led Sharkey from the stable. His identity was known to his companion, and he could not walk about a respectable town with a mask on without getting into trouble.

In ten minutes Wintry Jim had knocked at the door of a hotel, as it was called, and was admitted without hesitation.

"Come on, Sam. I guess thar's er game going on."

Sharkey followed his companion, and the two found themselves in a saloon, in which several cowboys and miners were drinking and talking. It seemed a strange time of the day for men to be engaged in such a way, but as it had been going on all night, and no one had expressed any desire to go to bed, it was easily explained, after all.

Wintry Jim did not stop in the saloon, however. There was something in the apartment beyond that was of much more interest to him.

As he opened the door he was greeted with a yell of satisfaction from a stout man in his shirt-sleeves, who would have been pronounced the landlord of the place even if he had not proclaimed himself to be such by calling to his bartender to set up drinks for the crowd "in honor of Wintry Jim."

"Thanks, King. I want some dry clothes more'n anything else," returned Wintry Jim, coolly, and without showing any particular elation over being made so much of by the landlord.

King Walters, the landlord of the Dewdrop Hotel, without another word, led Wintry Jim and Sam Sharkey through a doorway opposite to that by which they had entered, into a large room supplied with four bunks and a big fire in a round stove.

"Thar's all ther togs ez yer want," he said.

"Put 'em on while yer own is dryin'."

"Thanks!" responded Wintry Jim, briefly, as he changed his dress and threw out the cartridges from his revolver, to replace them with dry ones offered by King.

Sharkey followed his example, and the two men were ready to follow their host into the room in which the crowd had gathered by this time from the bar-room.

"Been swimmin', eh, Wintry? Couldn't yer hev got across ther river no other way?"

"Not with what we hed with us?" was Wintry Jim's significant reply, as he slowly winked his one eye.

"Oh!"

"I lost er good sure-shot revolver comin' across, too. Good thing I allers carry two," observed Wintry Jim, in his matter-of-fact way.

"Yes, a second gun comes in handy sometimes."

"Now, boys, hyar's Wintry Jim, ther best and squarest dealer in Wyoming or anywhar else. He'll take ther game fer yer, an' yer kin make yer bets without any fear uv er brace from any one."

This proclaimed King Walters, and Wintry Jim took his place at the faro-table with the ease and confidence of an old hand.

The ivory chips rattled as several of the miners, who were pretty well supplied with money, backed their cards, and Wintry Jim dealt from the case with the impassive countenance of one who had not the slightest interest in what was going forward although that one keen eye did not miss an incident or a word, as for an hour he never moved save to do what his occupation required.

Sam Sharkey had been supplied with some chips by the landlord, on receiving the assurance that the cowboy was broke, and so well had Sharkey chosen his cards, that he now had a pretty good stack before him.

Only once had there been any sign of a disturbance, and that was when a boy, in full cowboy rig, with a handkerchief half concealing his face by being fastened around over his forehead and covering his right eye, which was still further obscured by the flapping brim of his large soft felt hat, had insisted in joining the game.

"We don't want no boys in this hyar game," declared the landlord, gruffly. "Go home ter bed. What air you er doin' hyar, anyhow, er kid like you."

The words were hardly out of King Walters' mouth when a six-shooter flashed in his face, as the boy replied:

"Take thet back, or, by ther great horn spoon, I'll perforate yer. Yo' hear me."

"Wal, I swan! Ther kid hez pluck, ain't he?" exclaimed some one in the background in an admiring tone. "You d better take it back, King."

King Walters flushed with chagrin, but there was a something about the way the small hand grasped the stock of the revolver, with one finger on the trigger, that told him there would be an explosion of gunpowder right there if he did not do as he was told.

"All right, stranger! I didn't mean no harm," he muttered.

"What made yer say it, then?" demanded the boy, without lowering his gun.

"Oh, jist er kind uv er joke, thet's all."

"Shouldn't joke with people ez yer don't know. I've killed er man fer er great deal less than thet. Kin I come inter ther game?"

"In course yer kin."

"All right."

The boy took his revolver out of King Walters's face and stepped up to the table as he produced a twenty dollar gold piece and bought some chips from Wintry Jim, who, impassive as ever, had not moved during the exciting episode just concluded, and who handed over the chips and pocketed the money as coolly as if he had been selling a loaf of bread.

But he was looking closely at the boy and trying to remember whom he resembled that Wintry Jim knew.

"Could almost sw'ar I've seen thet face afore," thought Wintry Jim, "and yet thar seems ter be something queer about it, ez if thar had been some great change in it. I'll place him after a while, I guess."

With this philosophic reflection he went on dealing the cards and taking care that the "bank" received its full dues.

Wintry Jim had dealt cards at faro night after night in different mining towns without sleep, and he was in his element now.

King Walters took a hand in the game himself now. He was an inveterate gambler and although he was backing the game he could not resist the temptation to play against himself.

He went into it with considerable zest, and was as delighted when he won as if he were not merely taking it out of one pocket to place it in another.

But that was not his only pleasure in the game. He had not forgiven this boy for snubbing him in his own house, and he had determined to have revenge somehow.

He was not a very quick-thinking man, but he made up his mind at last that it would be a good thing to fasten a quarrel upon the little fellow and get the drop on him, so that he could make him apologize.

"I wouldn't want ter kill ther kid," he muttered.

"What's thet?" suddenly demanded the boy, who was sitting by his side.

"Eh?"

"What did yer say?"

"Nothin'."

"I thought yer spoke."

"No."

"Oh!"

King Walters looked at the boy as if he thought him possessed of supernatural powers of hearing.

"I didn't know I spoke out loud. Durned ef this hyar kid can't read er feller's thoughts."

For ten minutes longer the game went on in silence. Then King Walters, as if without thinking, seized several of the boy's chips.

The small hand seized his wrist, as the boy said, in a hissing whisper:

"Take yer hand away or I'll drive my knife through it."

This was what King Walters wanted.

With a whoop, he started back, and drawing his revolver, fired a shot so close to the boy's head that it cut off a lock of his hair that hung over his ear.

The boy's hand flew to his revolver, but before he could get it out Wintry Jim had leaned over the table and pinned his hand to his side.

"Quit thet, will yer?"

The boy struggled to get his hand free, when Wintry Jim, with a sudden movement, twitched from the boy's head the hat and handkerchief and then started back in utter amazement.

"Sue!" he gasped.

CHAPTER XIV.

SUE'S EVIL GENIUS.

SUE's long fair curls fell in a mass on her shoulders as the hat and handkerchief that had confined them were taken away and she put up her left hand instinctively to try and restrain them.

King Walters, mystified by the appearance of the youngster and the exclamation of Wintry Jim, had lowered his pistol, and was trying to get through his stupid head what it all meant.

"Wal, Wintry Jim, an' ef it is Sue what hev yer ter say 'bout it?" demanded the girl, defiantly. "Ain't I ez much right hyar ez you an' ther rest uv ther fellers?"

Wintry Jim was so taken by surprise that he could not answer, and Sue turned from him to King Walters.

"Ef this hyar feller hadn't pulled ther handkerchief off my head, I'd hev shown you something ez would hev made you careful how you tried ter bluff the boys," she said.

"Wal, I'm durned!" was all that proceeded from the mouth of the burly host.

"Oh, shet up, yer big stiff. Yer make me tired," said the girl contemptuously.

"Sue, what are yer doing hyar?" demanded Wintry Jim, in an undertone.

"None uv yer business."

"Won't yer tell me?"

"No."

"Thet's plain enough," returned Wintry Jim, with an ugly grin.

The girl snatched her hat and handkerchief from him, and walking to the other end of the room, where she saw a mirror, she proceeded to arrange them on her head in the same fashion that she had worn them before.

As soon as her back was turned Wintry Jim made a sign to Sam Sharkey, who had prudently kept in the background during the scrimmage and had not been seen by Sue.

Sam stepped forward now, and gruffly inquired of Wintry Jim what he wanted.

Wintry Jim whispered a few words in his ear, and Sharkey, with a nod of intelligence, left the room, and made his way to the street, where there were some signs of life now, the residents having mostly arisen to prepare for the occupations of the day.

Sue was busy putting on her handkerchief, and was looking into the mirror in an abstracted way as she did so. But she was not so absorbed with the handkerchief as not to have eyes for other things in the room.

"Wintry Jim thinks he is almighty smart, I know," she muttered, "but he don't seem ter remember thet er mirror shows everything in ther room ef er feller looks inter it."

She saw some one go over to Wintry Jim, and then disappear through the door to the street.

"I wonder who thet other feller wuz?" she mused. "I couldn't see his face."

A sudden idea struck her.

"Sam Sharkey, ez sure ez I'm hyar," she muttered. "Now, what does thet mean? Wal, I don't keer what it means. I'm ready fer any uv 'em, ez they'll find out ef they come any monkey business."

Reassuring herself thus, she stepped to the table and giving King Walters a thump in his back with all her strength, she asked:

"Wal, old chump, kin I play now?"

King Walters winced under the blow, and answered, with something of admiration in his tone:

"Play all yer want. Er boy ez kin bluff Wintry Jim an' King Walters at one time, is good enough ter take er hand at faro in my house. You hear my squeak."

Sue laugh carelessly, and looking Wintry Jim steadily in the eye, put some chips on one of the cards of the lay-out with the ease and nonchalance of an old stager at bucking the tiger.

Wintry Jim had resumed his impassive manner, and although he kept his one eye pretty steadily on Sue when she was not looking at him, he did not let her see that she was the particular object of his regard.

Wintry Jim believed in taking everything coolly, and nothing put him out more than to be compelled to hurry. The only time he ever displayed haste was when he got

the drop on some foe, and the people who knew him best were willing to back him to draw and shoot as quick as any bad man in the Northwest.

The other men around the table played steadily. They had not taken part in the trouble between Sue and Wintry Jim, and none of them believed she was anything but the boy she pretended to be. The mere fact of her having long hair did not prove anything to the company. Long hair is so often affected in the West that it does not provoke any remark.

Although it was broad daylight outside, the shutters were closed tightly and no one in the room could have had any idea that the sun was shining if he had not happened to see the light when the outer door was opened.

King Walters kept his saloon and gambling room running day and night, and although the bar-room was opened to the public during the day, the room in which the faro lay-out was kept going never saw the daylight.

Sue kept on playing, as if she had no thought but to win all the money she could. Perhaps that was her only object, but Wintry Jim, who had enjoyed the young lady's acquaintance for over a year, did not believe it. He was waiting for what might turn up.

At last his quick ear caught the sound of footsteps in the bar-room—footsteps that were not those of the bartender or the two miners who had spent the night in hanging over the bar, and who had been fighting and sleepy drunk alternately for the last twelve hours.

"Now for it," he muttered, as he went on dealing the cards in his impressive manner.

"Wonder how it will turn out."

Sue's revolver stuck out of its scabbard in a rather ostentatious manner, and occasionally her hand fell upon the butt when it was not engaged in handling her chips.

"Ther little cuss means fight, ef thar is anything to fight erbout," thought Wintry Jim. "I wonder whether Bob will know what ter do with her?"

He was still dealing when a short man who had his face partly hidden in the same way as Sue's, stepped into the room, and in a wheezy whisper asked:

"Is this game open fer everybody?"

"Yes," answered Wintry Jim.

As he spoke he looked closely into the face of the stranger, or as much of it as was visible, and a hard smile twitched his features and almost closed his one eye for an instant.

"Jist what I thought," he whispered to himself.

The stranger did not play, but contented himself with watching.

He took up a position immediately behind Sue, and looked over her shoulder at the table, with an occasional glance in the direction of Wintry Jim.

"Wal, this is sport, ain't it?" observed Wintry Jim, after a few minutes of silent play.

Sue looked up quickly, to see whether there might be a double meaning in his words, but his aspect was as innocent as it was possible for his rather unprepossessing face to look.

King Walters had dropped into a doze in the corner, and the miners who were taking part in the game were too much occupied to notice much that went on away from the table.

If they had been watchful they would have seen that Sam Sharkey had returned, and that he was not alone.

The man with him kept his hat on, as did every one else for that matter, but he had the flapping brim drawn down as far as possible, with the evident intention of concealing his identity.

Wintry Jim saw the stranger, and there was the slightest perceptible closing of his one eye, to which the stranger responded by a significant nod.

Sue played on, unconscious of the presence of the two new-comers, and as carelessly as ever:

"Hold on, thar!" exclaimed the girl at last, putting out her hand and seizing Wintry Jim's wrist. "Bring out thet other card. I saw yer hiding it in yer hand. Thet don't go with me. I want er squar game."

The remonstrance of Sue was the signal for general confusion.

The man by her side threw his arms around her waist, and took the girl's revolver at the same moment.

Sue tore herself partly away, and snatched the revolver. Ere she could fire, however, a voice whispered something in her ear.

She fell back as if she had been shot.

"What?" she gasped.

The short man raised the handkerchief and revealed the face of Marcia.

"Ha! ha! You think you get away. Now I haf ye!"

The girl seemed to be stricken helpless by the mysterious power this old woman possessed over her, and as Sharkey seized her by the hand, and dragged her toward the street, all the bravado that had distinguished her departed. She was nothing but a very weak and frightened girl.

"Hurry, now!" shouted the man with the large-brimmed hat, who had been standing behind Sue, and who was now revealed as Bob Grant. "Git her out!"

Wintry Jim fell in behind, so as to prevent any attempt at rescue, and the party reached the street, without any incident save the waking up of King Walters, and his demand to know where Wintry Jim was going.

"I'll be back soon. Ther money and chips is all thar in ther basket under ther table. You deal till I come back," cried Wintry Jim.

"All right," answered King. He had perfect confidence in Wintry Jim's honesty so far as the gambling-room was concerned. Jim had never been known to do a crooked thing in that direction. That was his code of honor.

Marcia was grinning like a fiend, as she held one of Sue's wrists and kept on whispering in a taunting way in her ear.

Bob Grant did not speak. He walked ahead, as if quite satisfied that his men could be trusted to look after his interests behind.

Sharkey was on the other side of Sue from Marcia, and as they left the saloon and walked down the street in the direction of the suburbs of the city, he whispered:

"Sue?"

"Wal?"

"I'll git yer out uv this ef yer'll promise me ter do what I've asked yer several times."

The girl looked at him with an expression of ineffable disgust.

"What—marry yer?"

"Yes."

"Not ef it wuz ter make me ez rich ez Jay Gould. I'd ez lief marry a rattlesnake."

Sharkey scowled, for he saw that the girl meant what she said.

The little group moved swiftly up the street, and had nearly arrived at the house to which they had taken their horses when they arrived in the city, when they met two men who, in long black coats, that reached nearly to their heels, and wearing wide-brimmed, black hats, looked like members of some religious sect such as may be met with in many parts of the United States. Each had a long white beard, covering the entire lower part of his face, which added to his patriarchal appearance. They appeared to be very old, for they walked with stout canes and were bent over as if walking at all were a task that they could hardly manage.

"Friend," said one, stopping in front of Bob Grant, "can thee direct us to a decent boarding-house?"

"Whar did yer come from?" demanded Bob Grant, suspiciously.

"Verily, we slept in a place last night wherein there was gambling and all sorts of evil-doings, and we would fain find a more fitting place of sojourn while we are in the city."

"Where do you come from?"

"Pennsylvania. We are traveling through this country so that we can tell our brethren about the wonders of the Northwest when we return home."

Bob Grant looked searchingly at them, and then muttered to himself: "Might do some business with these hyar old innocents."

"What sayest thou?" asked the old man who had been carrying on the conversation, the other one remaining silent.

"I can take you to a quiet house where I live, if you like to go," answered Bob.

"Is it far? My brother and I are both a-weary."

"No. Five minutes walk."

"Verily then, we will accept your offer."

"Hev yer any baggage?"

"Verily, we have, at the house whereof I told you."

"All right. Come along."

Marcia, Wintry Jim and Sharkey had walked on with Sue, and now Bob Grant and his two new acquaintances followed.

In less than ten minutes the whole party were in the house attached to the stable to which the reader has already been introduced.

CHAPTER XV.

CLOSING A BARGAIN.

ONCE inside the house, and Marcia released Sue from her grasp, although keeping a watchful eye on her.

The first thing Marcia did was to take Sue to an up-stairs room, where both changed their dress of cowboys for others befitting their sex.

The old woman kept a long knife and revolver that she had hidden about her, and also took possession of the silver-mounted revolver that Sue had flourished with such good effect in King Walters's gambling saloon.

"Hyar's yer money," said the old woman, handing a handful of gold that she had taken out of the girl's pockets.

Sue took it, for she was a practical girl, and she knew that it would be impossible to do anything without the sinews of war.

The change of dress completed, the two went down-stairs. Sue, in a neat calico dress and with a clean white apron, was a prettier figure than in the costume of a cowboy, but as for Marcia, she was as offensive to the eye in one costume as another. Beauty was not her strong point.

A large room, with a kitchen stove, in which Sam Sharkey had made a fire, was occupied by all the men when the old woman and Sue came down.

"Breakfast, Marcia," said Bob briefly.

The old woman, with the assistance of Sue, soon had a good meal spread on the large table. It consisted of coffee, bread, fried pork, eggs, and other dainties, including canned fruits, the whole neatly arranged on a white table-cloth that would have done credit to any well-kept house in the country.

"Verily, thou livest well," observed the old man who had acted as spokesman for himself and his friends.

"Yes," was Bob's sententious response, as he ate his breakfast with the heartiness of a man who had earned his meal and appreciated it now that he had it.

"Wal, gentlemen," observed Bob Grant, when breakfast was over and Marcia and Sue were busy clearing the things out of the way, "how long are you going to stay in Evanston?"

"A few days."

"You air hyar fer pleasure only, I s'pose? You ain't investing in any business, eh?"

The old man looked at Bob Grant earnestly, and then winked at him deliberately and with an expression of the deepest cunning.

"We do business sometimes," he murmured, in a weak tone that was utterly belied by his manner. "But—we do not let every one know what it is."

"Hev yer been in Chicago any time?"

"Verily we have. We have a correspondent, named Isreal Gruenfeldt."

Bob Grant started and looked at the old man as if he would read his very soul.

"What line is he in?"

"Who?" asked the old man, innocently.

"This hyar Chicago man. What's his name—Gruen—Gruen—"

"Isreal Gruenfeldt."

"Yes. Thanks. What does he do?"

The old man smiled as he answered, meekly:

"He buys things?"

"What sort of things?"

"All sorts."

"Money, for instance?" asked Bob, with his dark eyes fixed on the other.

"Yes, money. I sometimes buy—"

The old man hesitated, as if he feared he were getting to be confidential. But Bob

Grant, who evidently considered that he could afford to speak out, seeing that he had the two old men in his own house, and therefore in his power, finished the sentence:

"You buy things that hev been—lost?"

The old man chuckled.

"Ain't thet right?" persisted Grant.

"Perhaps so. Verily, you are sharp."

"Hev ter be, in these days. Wal, see hyar, p'raps we kin do some business!"

"Shouldn't be surprised, if you have anything that I can turn into money with my friend, Isreal Gruenfeldt," answered the old man, cautiously.

"Turn into money? Why, I have money to sell."

"Aha!"

"You know what I mean, eh?" asked Bob Grant.

"I think so. Where is the money you have to sell?"

"Not so fast. How much will you buy?"

"That depends. If it is well made I will take all you have, no matter how much it is, but I shall not take it till it gets to Chicago. I never work without my correspondent, Isreal Gruenfeldt."

"Thet's er pity. I wanted some ready cash hyar, and I would be willing ter sell some uv ther stuff I hev hyar cheap on thet account."

"Let me see some."

Grant looked steadily at the old man again, but there was no sign of his quailing under the look, and as for the other old man, he had gone to sleep, apparently.

"All right. I'll go and get two or three samples," said Grant, as he left the room, closely followed by Sharkey and Wintry Jim.

They had hardly left the room when Grant put his head inside and called Marcia.

"We may need you out hyar! Sue, you kin stay and keep these young gentlemen company," he added with a grin.

"All right, Bob. Anything you say," was Sue's careless response.

Grant disappeared again, but in less than two minutes the door opened a little way, and he peeped in.

The old man was still asleep, and the other, with whom he had had the conversation, was deep in the perusal of a note-book.

"I guess he's all right," muttered Grant.

"Besides, I kin trust Sue ter keep her eye on him. She ain't ez much ter be depended on ez I would like, but she'll do thet."

He retired as silently as he had come, and closed the door behind him softly, without either of the old men being aware that he had come back to watch their proceedings.

While Grant was on his way to the stable, satisfied that all was safe in the house, there was somewhat of a change in the demeanor of the meek old man.

He waited for at least another minute before he moved. Then he left his seat, and, gliding to the door, shot a bolt that had caught his eye as soon as he had entered the room.

Then he stepped over to Sue, whose back had been toward him, and taking the long white beard from his face, showed her the countenance of Wild Pete.

"Wal, I swow!" exclaimed Sue.

"Hush, Sue! We hev ter move quickly in this hyar matter. Ef Bob Grant knew I wuz hyar—"

"He'd kill yer," said the girl, quietly.

"Ef I give him ther chance."

"He'd make ther chance."

"Guess you air right, Sue. Anyhow I kin depend on you, I suppose. Can't I?"

"Thet's what yer kin. I don't owe nothin' ter Bob Grant. He sez he's my uncle, but I don't believe him, and I ain't taking his side on 'count of no relationship, you kin bet. He an' ther whole tribe up thar at ther ranch ain't no good, 'cept Babe Vincent."

"Thanks, Sue," put in the old man, waking up to say it, and falling asleep again immediately.

"What in thunderation does that mean?" asked Sue, mystified.

Wild Pete smiled, as he pulled off the other old man's beard, and revealed the face of Babe Vincent.

"Wal, ef you two fellers ain't dandies," exclaimed Sue, in admiration, as Wild Pete and Babe both resumed their beards. "But, say, whar is thet thar ridiculous Irishman?"

she asked, with a slight blush. "I never see sich er feller ez he is."

"Oh, he's all right," answered Wild Pete. "He's around town, but I didn't want him ter come in hyar. I wuz afraid he'd say something and give everything away."

"Wal, Sue, you want ter git erway from this hyar place, don't yer?" asked Babe, waking up again.

"Oh, I kin git erway when I want ter, I guess. But thet Marcia allers gives me er feeling ez ef I wuz goin' ter choke. Ef I could git somewhar whar I wouldn't hev ter see her no more, I'd be all serene. I come hyar 'cause I knew thar wuz er scheme ter put you fellers out uv ther way, an' I wuz sure thet ef they knew ez you wuz followin' them, they'd try ter do it. You see I wuz right."

"But they won't find us now. We hev ther best uv 'em."

"Look out. They air comin'," warned Sue.

"Move thet bolt back, quick," whispered Wild Pete, as he resumed his meek attitude in the character of the old man whose partner was Israel Gruenfeldt, of Chicago.

Sue had just time to obey and get back to the stove, when Bob Grant pushed open the door and cast a suspicious glance around the room.

He appeared to be satisfied, for he took a seat near Wild Pete and showed him some coins, bright and new, as they had been issued from his private mint, under his ranch.

"Thar they are. Ain't they beauties?"

The old man, who wore black cotton gloves, by the way, took the coins—a twenty-dollar, a ten-dollar, and several five-dollar gold-pieces—in his hands, and examined them closely.

His trained eye told him they were most dangerous counterfeits, and that the men who made them were no novices in the nefarious business. He weighed the coins in his hands, and looked at Bob Grant.

"Wal, what d'yer think uv 'em?" asked Grant.

"Verily, they are neat, but somewhat light."

"Not light enough ter hurt."

"Perhaps not," acquiesced Wild Pete.

"How much of ther stuff hev yer?"

"Five thousand dollars."

"Usual price?"

"Yes. Two thousand dollars, cash."

"In Chicago."

"I'll hev ter send er man thar to git ther money, I s'pose?"

"No, friend. I'll give you a certified check for the two thousand dollars on an Evanston bank."

"Yes," cried Bob Grant, delightedly.

"Dated two weeks from now," went on Wild Pete.

"Oh!" grunted Bob Grant, in a disappointed tone.

"That is perfectly just, friend," smiled Wild Pete. "I shall have reached Chicago before that time, and shall know whether the money I have brought is good."

"An' s'pose it isn't?"

"I should direct the bank to stop payment of the check for a few days."

"Wal, thet's all right. Write ther check an' you shall hev ther stuff. I s'pose I might do worse."

"Indeed you might," replied Wild Pete, significantly, although Bob Grant did not understand the full significance of the remark.

CHAPTER XVI.

A HORRIBLE SUSPICION.

THE old man took out a check-book and wrote a check for two thousand dollars payable to Robert Grant two weeks later, changing the name of the bank in Chicago printed on the check to the First National Bank of Evanston, Wyoming, and signing it Samuel Herman.

"When you are ready I will walk down to the bank and get this certified," he said, quietly, as he methodically tore out the slip and laid it in a long pocketbook.

"S'pose you go and do it now, while I'm gittin' ther stuff packed for yer."

"Very well," returned Wild Pete. "I'll leave my brother here. He is deaf, and will not disturb any one."

Wild Pete arose and hobbled out of the house, going down the street in the same bent-over attitude that he had assumed all along. He suspected that he was being watched from the house—as, indeed he was.

He reached a corner of the street, and turned around sharply ere he disappeared, that he might glance behind him.

"Not followed, so far, anyhow," he muttered. "Ha, ha! my fine fellow. I think I have you now."

He longed to throw off his disguise and go back to take Bob Grant, to take him "red-handed," as he had said.

The time was hardly ripe now, however. He must wait awhile till he had all the toils completed, and then he could give Bob Grant a surprise that would be delightful—to one side, at least, if not to the other.

He walked on in the direction of the bank, which was a considerable distance from the house in which he had left his "brother" and Bob Grant.

He had not quite reached the bank when he suddenly turned into a modest-looking place, of semi-official appearance, the door of which was unfastened. The room was fitted up with a desk, confined by a brass railing about three feet in height, behind which sat a man in a sack coat and wearing a broad-brimmed hat. He looked like a cross between a bartender and a cowboy.

Wild Pete nodded to him familiarly, and he returned the nod, but did not speak.

Wild Pete opened a door leading into a rear apartment, and unlocking a huge chest that stood in one corner, placed the coins he had received from Bob Grant in a tray at the top.

Then he lifted out the tray and saw that a lot of clothing of various styles was there, and then, with a smile, closed the lid and locked it again.

With another nod to the impassive man behind the desk, he walked out. He had only gone a few steps, however, when he turned back, and asked, quietly:

"Is ther jail all right?"

"Yes."

"Anybody in?"

"Only Wrastler Joe and Dirty Sim. They got inter a row at King Walters's place last night, an' wuz goin' ter do each other up! So I took ther two uv 'em an' locked 'em up. They're fast asleep now."

"Wal, I'd let 'em go when they come to. There's no harm in them. They'll go back to their ranch to-day, I suppose?"

"Yes. They spent all ther money last night, an' I guess they will both feel cheap when they wake up. They think they're bad men when they git full uv Wyoming whisky, but they are ez innocent ez babies when they are sober."

"All right. I expect ter hev two or three fellers uv different stamp ter-day," observed Wild Pete.

"So?"

"Yes."

"Not ther gang you've been after t'other side uv ther canyon?" asked the man behind the desk, with a sudden increase in interest.

"Yes."

"Geewhiz! Wal, we'll be ready fer them."

"Watch fer me," was Wild Pete's parting injunction, as he walked out of the house.

He reached the bank, and stepping to the teller's window, smiled at the determined-looking man with the short black mustache who had charge of affairs there.

"Will you certify this check for me, Doc?" asked Wild Pete, handing the slip to him.

The teller looked at it, curiously, and asked:

"And pay it?"

"Yes, if it ever comes to you."

"Well, captain, it is very irregular. Are you going to use it?"

"Yes. But, see here. I'll give you a check on my own bank in Chicago and open an account with the bank in the name of Samuel Herman. Then, if my plan slips up at all, the bank will be safe. See?"

"All right, captain. I know it would be all right anyhow, but it is as well to keep things straight," said the teller, apologetically.

Wild Pete did not answer, but he speedily wrote a check for two thousand five hundred

dollars, and then and there opened an account in the name of the supposed old man he represented himself to be.

With the certified check he was to give to Bob Grant safe in his pocket, Wild Pete left the bank and strolled easily along toward the house where he expected to obtain possession of the counterfeit money, and, if things were propitious, of Bob Grant himself.

He was just about to turn into the street in which the house was situated, when he ran plump into Dan McPhelan.

"Hello, Dan. Whar hev you been?" demanded Wild Pete, walking on and speaking to Dan as if he were not taking any notice of him.

Dan understood that he was to be careful on account of possible spies, and so he idled along at the other side of the sidewalk, as he answered:

"Oi've been watching the house iver since you wint inter it, as ye tould me, but devil a thing but yerself hov Oi seen come out of it all the marnin'."

"Wal, Dan. Keep close ter it fer ther next hour; or until yer see me come out."

"Yis."

"But ef yer hear any noise inside, such as pistol shots, don't be bashful about coming in."

"Indade Oi won't. Oi'd loike to be able to do somethin' besides loafin' about in dureways an' places, so Oi w'u'd."

"Wal, you will afore long. Thar's er per-tickler friend of yours in ther house."

"Who, for instance?"

"Marcia."

"The ould woman! Bad 'cess to her!" clucked Dan, as Wild Pete hobbled away, with a warning shake of the head of the young Irishman.

Wild Pete walked around the house to the stable, and was admitted there by Bob Grant, who had evidently been looking out for him.

Wild Pete looked sharply around, but there was no one in sight but the ranchman himself.

"Got the check?" asked Bob Grant.

"Yes. Is the stuff ready?"

For answer Bob Grant led him to the other door of the stable, where, in a small wagon, were three boxes, nailed up and addressed on the top, "Samuel Herman, Chicago."

Wild Pete stepped over to the wagon, and tried to lift one end of the boxes. He could have done so easily, but in his character of an old man he pretended that he could hardly move it.

"Money in these boxes?"

"Yes."

"Well, brother," responded Wild Pete, slowly, "I am a man of business, and I should like to see that the money is really in the boxes before I hand you the check."

Bob Grant made a half-concealed gesture of impatience, that did not escape Wild Pete's watchful eyes.

"I must see what is in those boxes," he went on, firmly.

"I tell yer ther money is in them," grumbled Bob Grant. "I hev hed er lot uv trouble in packin' up them thar boxes so ez ther stuff won't clink an' giye yer away. It's er pity ter open 'em now."

"Perhaps so, but verily I will not pay till I see what I am paying for."

With a very disgusted expression, Bob Grant produced a heavy nail-puller, such as is generally used for opening package-cases, and vigorously pulled the nails out of the lid of the box nearest to him, Wild Pete watching him closely the while.

The lid off, a lot of paper was revealed, carefully stuffed into the corners to prevent the contents of the box shifting about, and under the paper one of the long canvas bags before referred to, contained the gold made up in rolls, so that it could easily be counted.

Wild Pete ran over the money quickly and found that there were two thousand dollars in the bag.

"Satisfied?" asked Bob Grant, sulkily. "Yer partner counted 'em all over once and saw thet they were right, so thet I didn't think you would want ter do it too."

"I do not trust partners," was Wild Pete's quiet response, as Bob Grant nailed up the box. "Open the next, brother."

Again Bob Grant showed his disgust with a toss of his head, but the detective was ob-

durate, and insisted upon the box being opened.

At last all three of the boxes had been opened and inspected by Wild Pete, and then he handed the check to Bob Grant, and took a receipt, which Bob Grant had ready prepared.

"Now, thar's ther stuff. When air yer goin' ter start with it ter Chicago? I hev it put in er wagon, so ez you kin take it off my premises. I don't keer ter keep ther stuff around me when it's sold."

"Wise precaution, oh, my brother," said Wild Pete. "The train leaves for the East at three this afternoon. I'll take the stuff down to the depot now, if you will help me. I cannot drive myself, nor would it be seemly for a man of my appearance to be driving a wagon," murmured Wild Pete, meekly.

"I'll do it, certainly," responded Bob Grant. "You step out of this door that you come in at, while I drive ther wagon out at ther big gates over thar."

"All right."

Wild Pete walked outside and waited for the opening of the big gates that were several yards up the street.

He smiled to himself as he thought how nicely he was arranging matters so as to bring the Death-in-Life gang into the power of the law with very little trouble compared with the importance of the capture.

He could hear the horse and wagon moving around inside the stable and the voice of Bob Grant giving gruff commands to the animal.

He seemed to be having considerable trouble to get the wagon out, but the detective was in no particular hurry now.

He had fallen into a reverie of a pleasing character, when it struck him that he had been nearly ten minutes waiting for Bob Grant to come out.

Then a horrible suspicion entered his mind.

He listened closely at the big gates and then at the door by which he had come out. The door was locked and there was not a sound to be heard within.

"Great Caesar! What does it mean?" he muttered, as he shook the gates violently.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHO FIRED THE SHOT?

THERE was no response to Wild Pete's shaking of the gates, and after trying it for several seconds, he went to the door by which he had entered, and which he found fastened, as he expected.

"Some double game thet feller is playing on me. What a fool I was to trust him even for a moment out of my sight when he had the check. He'll get down to the bank and cash it in two weeks' time if I don't prevent it, and he will have the laugh on me, too."

Uttering these disjointed sentences, Wild Pete redoubled his efforts to get the door open, but it was evidently built to resist assault, and he could not make the least impression on it.

He was certain, by this time, that Bob Grant had fooled him in some way, although he did not know yet just how. It was barely possible that the ranchman was only laughing at him inside the stable, without any intention of defrauding him, after all.

The detective found that he could not open the door or the gates, and not the slightest sound was to be heard within, so he looked about to see what other means there might be of getting into the premises. There was a front door to the house, but he knew that it was a very heavy structure, and it had never been opened since the house had passed into the hands of Bob Grant, the rich cattle-raiser, who was known in Evanston almost entirely by reputation, he making it a point not to allow his appearance to become familiar in the city.

The windows were all closely shuttered, too, and the house was more like a well-fortified castle than a residence of a well-to-do business man, as it professed to be.

"Well, now, here's a pretty state of things. If Peter Swift—Captain Swift, of the United States Secret Service—has been fooled in this thing, I don't believe I shall ever be able to show myself in Washington again."

There was no mistaking the sorrowful tones in which the detective muttered these words. He evidently felt very deeply the

humiliation to which he began to feel sure he had been subjected by Bob Grant.

He did not believe the ranchman had penetrated his disguise, because he flattered himself that it was too good for any one to see through, but he was rapidly becoming convinced that Bob Grant had suspected Samuel Herman to be something more than the innocent old fellow with a taste for risky speculation, that he pretended to be.

"Well, the next thing is to find out about these things. I can't stop idling here, or the game will be up altogether."

This was the sum and substance of the detective's musings, and he hobbled away, still preserving his character of the old man in his demeanor, till he reached the spot at which he had left Dan McPhelan.

The Irishman appeared as if he had been on the lookout for his chief—as, indeed, he had.

"What's the news?" he asked, eagerly.

"Wal, I don't rightly know myself," answered Wild Pete, dropping into the Western vernacular as easily as he had dropped it while talking to himself.

"Faith, ye spake in riddles, as Father Conant, in the ould counthry, used to say whin the b'yes wuz a-lyin' to him 'bout the ructions they had been in at the fair."

"Dan," said the detective, "are yer pistols ready?"

"They are that same—two uv 'em, as purty a pair of goons as ye iver see," returned Dan, with a grin, as he scented a fight in the wind.

"Come with me."

"Oi wull that," answered Dan, as he placed his hands on the butts of the two weapons that he had extolled so highly, to make sure that they were safe in his belt under the sack-coat that he wore.

Wild Pete was pleased to see the alacrity with which Dan followed his directions. He felt that under any circumstances he could trust him, but he did not make any comment. He was thinking.

"We hev ter git inter this hyar place, Dan. I b'lieve ther rascals hev given us ther slip, after all."

"Ah, the shpalpeens! They hov a mighty insinuwating way wid thimselves."

Slowly the two men had walked back till they were outside the door of the stable, out of sight of the house, the stable being in the way.

"We'll hev ter force thet door, Dan."

"All roight."

Wild Pete placed his back against the door and pushed with all his might. He might have pushed against a mountain with as much result.

"It's barred inside," was Wild Pete's declaration, after shoving till he was out of breath, as well as out of temper.

Dan had stepped out into the road and was looking at the stable from roof to ground.

"Be the powers, Oi t'ink Oi can git in," he muttered.

"What's thet, Dan?"

"Jist give me a shmall taste uv a raise, an' Oi'll git in," replied the Irishman, with a grin of satisfaction.

Wild Pete followed the direction of his companion's glance, and saw to what he referred.

"You think thet thar window is open, eh?"

"Dunno 'bout it bein' open, but Oi t'ink Oi c'u'd soon shove it open, forbye Oi c'u'd rache it," answered Dan, confidently.

"Come on, then."

Wild Pete braced himself against the wall of the stable, and made a platform of his back. Dan stepped upon his back, and then, as Wild Pete straightened himself, got on his shoulders.

Fortunately there were no houses on the street, which was, in fact, a mere road on the very outskirts of the city, and therefore nothing more than an outlet to the plains beyond, with the Bear River interposing its long winding length between the city and the wild country on which the millions of cattle were grazing under the care of a small army of cow-punchers.

Had the street been at all public it would have been impossible for Wild Pete and Dan to carry on their operations, for the spectacle of an elderly gentleman, with a patriarchal beard and the general air of a country

minister, holding a brisk young fellow on his shoulders, and trying to boost him up to a window of a stable, would have excited too much comment for comfort.

"Wal, kin yer reach it?" asked the detective, as he stood on tiptoe to help Dan to get to the window.

"Oi can only jist touch it wid me fingers. If Oi hod about three inches more Oi c'u'd wurk at it widout any trouble," gasped Dan, who was considerably out of breath with his exertions.

Without a moment's hesitation, Wild Pete took off his sober-looking hat and threw it on the ground.

"Now, Dan."

"Phwat?"

"Thar's ther other three inches you wanted."

"How d'yez mane?"

"Git on my head."

"Faith, Oi'd hurt yez if Oi wuz to do that. Me shoes hez hard soles to 'em."

"Never mind. Do ez I tell yer."

"Can you hold me?"

"Never mind. Git on my head. Ef I drop yer it will be my fault."

"Yis, but, faith, I'll git the boomp," thought Dan.

However, the young Irishman had great confidence in Wild Pete, and, besides, he was anxious to do all he could to help in the enterprise, so he did not hesitate any longer. He placed one foot gingerly on the detective's head, which had a sort of padding in the white wig he wore, to say nothing of his own luxuriant hair, that was twisted into a knot and placed on top of his head under the wig.

"How's that?" asked Dan. "Does it hurt yez?"

"No, no," was the impatient reply. "Go on, and put yer other foot on my head. Don't yer know ez we air losing vailable time?"

Dan did not say anything more about hurting the detective, but raised his other foot to Wild Pete's head. He found that the detective had such a strong neck that the head did not even tremble with the tremendous weight upon it.

"Begorra! It doesn't wobble at all at all," muttered Dan, as he applied himself to the shutter of the window and tried to pull it open.

It was not secured in any way, but the wood had been swollen by rain, and stuck tightly—so tightly that Dan could not stir it with his hands.

"Bad 'cess to it," he grumbled. "But it has to come, if Oi stand here all day, so it has."

He took from his belt a bowie-knife, and, placing the point in the chink between the shutter and the door-post, pried at it with all his force.

"Steady, above thar, Dan. You'll slip off ef yer don't mind."

"Indade, an' Oi'll not," answered Dan. "But Oi'm goin' ter hov this dure open, so sure as Oi'm me mither's own son."

A powerful wrench with the bowie-knife, and the shutter flew open at the same time that the exertion made Dan lose his balance and his foothold on Pete's head, and down he came in a heap, head-first.

Fortunately the detective was on the alert, and caught the young Irishman before he touched the ground, or there might have been a cracked skull for him.

Dan did not seem to appreciate the danger he had been in of being hurt, as he looked up and saw that the shutter was open.

"Oi did it, didn't Oi. Be gob, Oi knew that Oi wuz as good as any old wooden shutter."

The opening he had made was about three feet square, and was evidently a window to give a little light to the loft over the stable proper.

"Wal, now, Dan, yer'd better crawl in thar an' see what's on the other side. But I don't s'pose yer'll see anybody thar. Bob Grant an' his gang are gone far enough away long afore this," said Wild Pete, in disgusted tones.

"Thin yez'll hov to guv me yur head ag'in, Oi'm thinking."

"Come on."

The detective took Dan by his two hands, and nodded for him to climb up. He had

seen that the young man was considerably of an acrobat, and could get up without having a platform made for him.

In ten seconds Dan was on the detective's head, and in two more was climbing on the little window.

"Hev yer pistol ready," was Wild Pete's parting injunction, as the Irishman's heels disappeared in the opening, with so much alacrity as to suggest his having fallen down inside.

Wild Pete placed his hat on his head and strolled up and down the street, in his character of an old man, watchful of anything that might take place in that vicinity.

Not a soul appeared, however, and Wild Pete was congratulating himself on his being able to carry on his investigations with regard to Bob Grant's stable without the interference of prying eyes, when he thought he heard Dan McPhelan's voice inside raised in a cry of surprise.

Like a flash the detective, forgetting that he was an old man, sprung to the door of the stable.

The door was still fastened, and he was helpless, so far as rendering any assistance to Dan. Was concerned. The window was too high for him to reach unassisted, even if it would have done any good for him to follow the Irishman, when he expected that the door would be opened every moment.

"Be gorral! The dhirty spalpeens!" he heard Dan exclaim, and then there was the loud crack of a pistol shot, followed, almost simultaneously, by a yell from Dan McPhelan.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHAT DAN FOUND.

LET us follow Dan McPhelan, when he made his way through the small window and dropped out of sight of Wild Pete.

He had propelled himself through the opening with considerable force when he lifted his feet from Wild Pete's head and had no control over himself.

The consequence was that when his body was more than half way through the hole he overbalanced and went headlong down.

"Murtherin' Moses! Phwat's this?" he exclaimed, but the words were hardly out of his lips when he found himself in a bed of hay, a few feet below the window.

As he and the detective had surmised, the window lighted a loft above the stable, as he had only fallen into the loft, instead of down into the stable, as he feared he might, when he lost his balance at the window.

To drag himself out of the hay and move cautiously across the floor of the loft was the work of an instant.

"Bad cess to it," he grumbled. "It's dark as a banshee's pocket in here, for all that the windy is open. Oi—"

What more he was going to say will never be known, for at that moment the floor seemed to give way beneath him, and he found himself bumping on a manger and from thence to the rather hard floor of the stable.

He had inadvertently stepped into a hole through which it had been the custom of the owners of the stable to let down feed for the horses.

The stable was quite dark, all the windows being tightly closed and the gates and door fastened so securely that they seemed almost like parts of the solid wall.

Dan felt around the spacious apartment, and soon convinced himself that there were no horses in it, although he could tell by the smell that there had been some there not long before.

"The whole gang hov got out, be the powers. But how they got out it's more than the brains uv me can tell. I'll hov to let the captain in, an see whether he can tell what it all m'anes."

He went to the door, but found that it had not only been locked and bolted, but that three heavy bars of wood had been nailed across it with long spikes that could not be drawn out without a great deal of labor and the proper tools.

"The shpalpeens! They hod the trick uv it, sure," he grumbled. "How'll Oi ever get the dure open?"

He groped his way to the double gates, but they were secured in a similar way.

"Faith! Oi don't think Oi hov made

much uv a move by gittin' in here. Deed Oi'm no more use than if Oi wuz outside."

Feeling his way about he came across another door immediately opposite that which led into the street at the rear of the stable, and this, he was glad to find, he could open.

"Well, this is something, anyhow," he thought. "Oi'll be able to see phwat Oi'm doin', now."

To open the door and find himself in a yard with a very high wall on either side, did not take Dan McPhelan long. The back of the house was before him, and he saw a flight of steps leading to the back door of the dwelling, that was well supplied with stone cellarage, but without any open door, that he could perceive.

He marched boldly up the steps, having noticed that the shutters of what he supposed was the back parlor or kitchen were open only about an inch, so that people inside could have a view of the yard, without anyone outside being able to see them.

To his surprise, the door at the top of the steps was unfastened and he turned the handle and entered a hall, from which he could see there were several doors leading into rooms, as he supposed.

Holding a revolver in his right hand, he gently turned the handle of the first door he came to and went in.

It was the kitchen, in which Wild Pete and Babe Vincent had had their breakfast with Bob Grant and his household some hours before.

The shutters being so nearly closed made the room so gloomy that Dan McPhelan, coming from the lighted yard, could not distinguish anything at first.

Then he heard a muffled sound, like a sigh or a groan.

"Howly saints! Phwat's that?" he exclaimed, shivering with a superstitious fear.

He rubbed his eyes, and then he saw, in a chair, over in one corner of the room a black bundle that he soon made out to be a man with a large black hat pulled well down over his face.

"Be the powers, Oi belave the poor divil is tied."

He was, indeed, tied. It was Babe Vincent, bound hand and foot, and with a big handkerchief fastened over his mouth.

To tear off the handkerchief and cut the ropes that bound his arms and legs was but the work of a moment for Dan McPhelan, and then he went to a closet that happened to be open, and took out a bottle of brandy that stood on a shelf, with a label to tell what it was.

"This will bring him 'round, Oi guess. But, faith, Oi'd better take a shmall taste of it myself first, jist to see thot it's all as it ought to be," whispered Dan confidentially to himself.

He took a modest pull at the bottle, and was satisfied.

"Begorra, it lacks the twang of the rale ould potcen, but it will do him good."

Babe was lying back in the chair, in his long black coat and with his white beard and wig still on, and was hardly conscious. In fact, if Dan had been ten minutes later the chances are that the young man would have been past help. He had been almost suffocated by the thick handkerchief, and the cords on his arms and legs had cut into his flesh and tended much toward the exhaustion under which he was now suffering.

"Here, thin. Take a sup uv this. It wull soon bring yez around. An ould man loike you oughtn't to be tied up this way."

Dan poured out some of the brandy into a cup, and Babe managed to drink a little. In a few moments he had revived somewhat, and was able to pull off the beard and wig and show to Dan McPhelan that it was not an old man.

"Phwy, phwat a fool Oi am. Be the powers, Oi'd forgot about you fixing up yourself loike this, an there wuz Oi callin' yez an ould man. Oi'm crazy, Oi do believe."

Babe smiled faintly. He was gradually pulling himself together, but it would be some little time before he would be quite himself. He had passed through a very rough experience.

"Can ye walk, do ye think?" asked Dan.

"Yes, I guess I kin. But thet old rascal got ther best uv me thet time, an' I don't feel very strong," answered Babe, doubtfully.

He arose to his feet, and was pleased to find that he was not so weak as he feared. In fact, when he had walked about the room a little he declared that he felt almost as good as new.

"Whar is Wild Pete?"

"Be jabers, Oi forgot him, an' Oi'll bet sixpence he is outside gittin' madder an' madder every minute. Oi c'u'dn't open the dure back there, an' Oi come inter the house to see whether there wuz any way uv gittin' out uv ther house instid uv the stable."

"Yes, we kin git out ther front door, an' I think the best thing we kin do is to go out, ef ther captain is waitin' outside. We may need his help in hyar afore we git through with this hyar business."

"Phwy? Is there any uv 'em left in the house?" asked Dan.

"I don't know. After they had fixed me up ther way you saw me they all went out to the stables, and what they did out thar I don't know any more than you do."

"Which is nothin'," put in Dan.

"Exactly."

Babe had resumed his white beard and wig, and he looked as patriarchal as ever as he stepped to the back door, except that he drew a revolver from the belt that was neatly hidden by the long black coat, and held it ready for instant use.

Hardly had he shown himself at the door when there was the loud report of a pistol, and a bullet imbedded itself in the door-post, within an inch of Babe Vincent's head.

"Durn their pictures!" he cried, in a fury. "Thar's some uv 'em in thet thar stable yet."

"Divil a doubt uv it," added Dan.

"Who do you suppose it is, Dan?"

"It's meself that don't know. Sure if Oi had seen any uv 'em, Oi'd hov shot 'em afore they c'u'd whistle," returned Dan, with an earnestness that left no doubt of his meaning exactly what he said.

Babe Vincent had closed the door, and looked inquiringly at Dan, as if to ask his opinion of the next thing to be done.

"Better let the captain in, Oi say," observed Dan, in answer to Babe's look.

"Great head, Dan," said Babe, as he hastened to the front door, to carry out the Irishman's recommendation.

CHAPTER XIX.

TOO SMART FOR BABE.

WILD PETE was walking up and down at the rear of the stables, in a highly excited state when Babe Vincent and Dan McPhelan appeared before him.

"Hello! I wuz beginnin' ter think ez I'd hev ter come in after you pretty soon, an' ter climb through ther stable winder at thet, ef I could."

Wild Pete was in better humor than either of the others, although he had had to wait by himself for a long time, without knowing what was going on inside.

"Mebbe it would hov been a good thing if you had," responded Dan. "For divil a wan uv me knows what good Oi did meself in there."

"You saved my life, for one thing, Dan," observed Babe.

"Yis, Oi did thot, to be sure," said Dan, coolly, as if that were not so important a thing, although he did not mean that.

Wild Pete cut the conversation by walking into the house through the front door, which they had left open, and by which they followed him.

A few words sufficed to explain to the detective the situation of affairs so far as they were understood by Dan and Babe, and then the three held a council of war, to decide what to do next.

That Bob Grant had suspected treachery and had found some way of circumventing his pursuers. While he did not know that he had been dealing with Wild Pete and his men, he did not believe the two old men were exactly what they pretended to be, so he got away without concluding the bargain he had made with the detective.

"Who tied you, Babe?" asked Wild Pete.

"I don't know, but I guess it was thet durned old woman. Somebody came behind me and held a cloth over my face so that I couldn't move, an' then I got sleepy, an' I didn't know nothin' until I found myself

nearly choking, and tied up, until Dan came and brought me to myself."

"Um! They chloroformed yer. 'It's er wonder they didn't kill yer while they wuz about ther job."

Thus speaking Wild Pete went to the back door leading to the yard and opened it.

He had hardly done so when a revolver cracked, and but for the fact that he had stepped behind the door as soon as he opened it, the chances are that he would have been out of the excitement for a week or two, at all events.

"Ther rascals! Thar's some uv 'em thar still."

"Of coorse there is, captain. Didn't yez hear thim blazin' away at me afore you come in?"

"I heard a shot, but didn't know who fired it."

"Do you know now?" asked Dan, with a grin.

"No, but I'll soon find out," was the grim reply.

There was some one in the stable, that was evident, and as the person, whoever it was, had a clear shot at the top of the steps, without being exposed himself, it did not seem a very hopeful task to get him out without loss of life on the other side.

Wild Pete thought for a moment, and then he smiled as a thought struck him.

"Dan, you stay hyar, and be ready ter shoot down any one ez comes out uv ther stable into ther yard."

"All roight, captain."

"And, Babe, you come with me."

"Whar air yer goin'?"

"I'm going ter git inter ther stable ther same way ez Dan went, an' I want you ter help me reach ther window."

"There's a step-ladder in the kitchen," suggested Dan.

"Ther very thing! I'll take that. Then you can stay hyar with Dan, Babe, and then ef any one comes out uv ther stable you needn't shoot ef you kin take 'em prisoners. See?"

"Yes."

"Wal then, keep a sharp lookout, and I'll get in ther stable ther other way and drive 'em out."

"Moind they don't droive you out, Cap," said Dan, as Wild Pete took the long step-ladder and made his way to the back of the stable.

Dan and Babe took up their positions behind the half open-door, where they could see the stable without their being exposed to the fire of whoever might be concealed in it.

Babe and Wild Pete had both taken off the long black coats that concealed their regular cowboy costume, but retained the black hats, that, however, with a little manipulation easily assumed the rakish shape affected by the cow punchers who wanted to be recognized as one of that knowing class to whom nothing in the way of ranch life came amiss.

The two men had been able to cover themselves completely with the black coats, and were fully equipped underneath, even to the quirt that was so useful in controlling the gyrations of their bronchos, and of course with their pistols and cartridge-belts.

They waited until they thought that Wild Pete had had enough time to plant his step-ladder outside the stable, and to climb up to the little window, and then, revolver in hand, they prepared themselves for what might follow.

"Begorra, he's a long toime. Oi hope they hoven't ate him up, boots an' all," observed Dan, after awhile, during which they had not heard or seen anything of the detective.

"No fear," returned Babe. "He's—"

Just then there was the crack of a revolver, followed by two shots in rapid succession from another.

"Thet's Wild Pete's gun. I'd swar ter it anywhar," cried Babe, excitedly.

He darted out from behind the door and ran down the steps, followed closely by Dan.

In the mean time several other shots were heard from the interior of the stable, but no one came out.

"What does it mean?" parted Babe, who had not quite recovered fr

the chloroform and the hard usage he had been subjected to, and who therefore got out of breath easily.

"Faix, I don't know, but they seem to be hovin' lots uv divarsion in ther shtable so they do."

"Dan now took the lead, and darted into the stable.

One glance around it told him it was empty, but the smoke and smell of gun-powder was good evidence that the battle of which they had heard the noise must have taken place here.

"Phwere in thoonderation are they?" muttered Dan, in a puzzled tone. "This b'ates all Oi iver heerd uv."

Babe was in the stable now, and he was equally nonplus ed.

"Oh, Oi know," said Dan, upon whom a light seemed to break. "The loft!" pointing overhead.

In one corner there was a spiral staircase, and to this Dan and Babe sprung together.

Dan was ahead, and he rushed up the stairs with his revolver in his hand, in the firm persuasion that he would be in the heat of battle in another moment.

He had no sooner reached the floor of the loft than he stumbled headlong over something, his revolver flying from his hand at the same time.

"Bad 'cess to it! Phwat's that?"

Babe saw what it was at a glance, and almost ere the Irishman had gained his feet, was bending over it to see whether life was extinct.

The obstruction was nothing more or less than the unconscious form of Marcia, the hag.

"Is she kilt?" asked Dan.

"She's not dead, ef thet's what yer mean, Dan."

Even as he spoke Marcia corroborated his statement by groaning and then muttering some words in French.

"Been knocked on the head, I guess," said Babe, as his experienced eye rested on a bruise on her forehead that had probably been inflicted by a man's fist.

Marcia was sitting up now, and as she placed her hand to her forehead, as if trying to recall her scattered senses, she muttered:

"*Sacre! Diable!* Where is ze scoundrel! I vill keel him! He think he win ze prize! I se-c-e-c-ratch him. I vill!"

"Nice old lady!" thought Babe.

"Phwat's the matter with the ould woman?" asked Dan, looking down at her inquiringly. "Phwat's the matter, darlint?"

The old woman arose to her feet with an effort, and showed that she had her favorite knife in her hand, but did not attempt to use it on Dan, as he had feared for the moment was her intention, and had therefore made the praiseworthy resolution to shoot her if she tried it. She looked wildly about her for a moment, and then ran to the window.

"Look!" she screeched. "Look! See! He goes! He goes!"

The two men followed her to the window, and then Dan exclaimed, in a frenzy of excitement: "Be gorra! There is the captain, on his black horse, and he's after 'em!"

"Oui! Yes! *Sacre!* And Sue! See! Sam Sharkey! He steal her! See!"

"By ginger! Thet's so!" cried Babe, who seemed to comprehend the whole matter. "There is Sharkey, or some one, with the girl tied on the saddle of one horse, while he is holding her with a rope from the saddle of another."

"Yis, but thot ain't all. Don't yer see two other men making fer the river away over to the left?"

"Durn it! I don't onderstand! Thar's ther captain on Diablo! But I'll be blamed ef I kin make out which he's er follerin'."

"Onyhow, we ought to go afther him, oughtn't we?" suggested Dan.

"Yes, but what air we ter do with ther old woman?"

"I'll go with yer," declared Marcia to the utter surprise of the two men. "I'm going ter get zat gal back. She's worth money—money."

"Oho!" muttered Dan. "I remember now, I heard the captain say there was a little mystery about her thet he wuz goin' ter cl'ar up afore he left this hyar part uv ther country. P'raps ther old woman knows what it is, too."

Dan was looking at Marcia doubtfully.

He was suspicious of her intentions, and would have preferred to tie her hand and foot and keep her till he could turn her over to Wild Pete.

Marcia seemed to read exactly what was passing in his mind, and she sniffed contemptuously, as she exclaimed:

"Oh, you need not be afraid. I go with you. I could kill you both now, if I liked. But, *sacre!* I only want to get my gal back, an' then—"

"That will do, Marcia. We will take you."

"*Tres bien!*"

"Who is in the house—anybody?"

"No."

"Come on."

Babe motioned to her to go first, after he had closed the shutter, and she went down the spiral staircase, without looking back. She was not so suspicious of the two men as they were of her.

"How did they get out, Marcia?" asked Dan when they had reached the lower floor of the stable.

The old woman grinned as she led them to the end of the stable and pointed to the floor.

Following the direction of her finger, Babe saw that there was a large iron ring half concealed in the sawdust. He pulled it, and, as if working on a spring, a large section of the flooring came up, revealing a hole and an inclined path that led out of sight, the passage-way being very high, so that a horse could easily walk out that way.

He understood at once that it was a secret outlet by which horses could be removed from the stable, without being seen by people in the vicinity.

"We will go out this way," said the old woman, briefly, as she led the way into the house, by way of the steps and the back door described already.

All over the house went the three people. The up-stairs rooms were arranged as bedrooms, all comfortably furnished, as if it were the intention of the owner to entertain company and have nice rooms for them to sleep in.

They had been in all the bedrooms, and into the kitchen and parlor on the main floor, when Babe suggested that they examine the cellar, too.

Marcia shrugged her shoulders.

"Ah! Thet I cannot. He keeps it locked and barred. It would take us two—three hours to get in."

She led the way to an iron door, and showed that it was padlocked with a patent lock, and that there were two iron bars, each fastened in the same way.

"He have all these locks, and he have secret locks, too," said the old woman, and her manner left no room for doubt that she was speaking the truth.

"Wal, I guess we'll hev ter let the cellar go," said Babe Vincent, adding, under his breath: "But if me an' ther captain don't go through thet thar cellar afore we are a week older, may I never tame another horse ez long ez I live."

Five minutes later the party were in the open air, having walked down the inclined pathway in the stable to another stable, where they each found a horse to suit them, and were yet able to leave two more for a future emergency.

As all three put spurs to their wiry bronchos, and headed for the Bear River, Babe shook his head deprecatingly as he said:

"Wal, I'm no good, fer I could hev sworn thet thar wasn't another horse anywhere about thet house. Bob Grant is too smart fer me, but I don't think he can get away with ther captain."

CHAPTER XX.

THE BLOTCH OF BLOOD.

By the time Babe Vincent, Dan McPhelan and Marcia got into the street the parties they were pursuing were out of sight.

They had made for the Bear River, and the inference was that they had found some means of crossing it, unless indeed they had skirted it, keeping out of sight in the valley through which the river passed, and which was so full of hills and buttes that it would be easy for them to be hidde from any one coming from Evanston.

What Babe and Dan would have liked to know was whether Wild Pete was following Bob Grant and Wintry Jim, whom they supposed his companion to be, or whether, on the other hand, he was after Sam Sharkey and Sue.

Babe knew that Wild Pete would be about equally anxious to catch either, since he had said that there was something about Sue that he must clear up, but that he had not fully understood until he had come to Evanston this time.

"Now, let me think about this hyar thing," muttered Babe, as he rode along at full speed, with the old woman on one side and Dan on the other. "He wants the girl. That's one thing. Wal! He may think thet ef he lets er feller like Sam Sharkey git away with her, it may not be easy ter trail 'em."

"Phwat did you say?" asked Dan, who had caught a word or two.

"Nothin', Dan. I'm jist thinking."

"Oh! All roight! Go ahead. One uv us ought to think, for Oi am all in a maze."

"Wal," went on Babe, to himself, resuming the current of his musings. "Thet's another thing. Now, as ter Bob Grant, he'll most likely go back ter ther ranch, whar he hez er lot uv them scallawags ter help him, so thet he p'r'aps thinks Wild Pete can't hurt him thar."

He gave his horse a cut with his whip, as if he must do something to help him in his deliberations, that were beginning to confuse him.

"Thet's er silly thing ter do. What's ther good uv me hittin' ther horse? It ain't his fault ef I'm er fool. But, let me see. Yes, of course. Wild Pete will go after Sharkey first, 'cause he allers knows whar to find Bob Grant. An' besides, he's got all ther evidence he wants. Yes, thet's it."

He smiled broadly as he made up his mind, and Dan asked him what he was laughing at.

"Nothing pertick'ler, Dan, 'cept thet I feel sure ther captain hez gone after Sam Sharkey, an' we'll foller him."

"All roight, Babe, anything you say goes wid me."

"Sacre! Of course he followed Sharkey. I could tell you that," put in the old woman. "I know."

"I'm afraid you know more'n is good fer yer," muttered Babe, eying the old woman with an expression that was anything but favorable.

They rode in silence until they reached the rough ground in the valley by the side of the river and then they stopped as if they were not sure how to proceed.

Not a sign of any of the people they were following was to be perceived, and Babe admitted to himself that he was thoroughly at fault.

"They must hev got across the river," he muttered. "Thet's er sart'nty. So ther fu'st thing fer us ter do is ter go after 'em."

"Faix, are we goin' to shwim it?" asked Dan, looking at the yellow water with an expression that indicated anything but delight at the prospect.

"Not ef we kin git across any other way," answered Babe. "Ah, hyar's ther arrangement ready fer use," he added.

He had found a large raft moored to a jagged rock, and stout enough to carry two or three horses and men.

"Begorra, that is a gimerack-lukin' thing, but Oi s'pose we wull hev to go on it," commented Dan, under his breath.

Babe dismounted, and, with Dan's assistance, managed to shove the raft a little away from the shore, so that it would float easily away when the cargo was aboard. Then he led Marcia's horse upon it, without troubling the old woman to get down, and followed with his own and Dan's horses.

"Faith, she wobbles!" observed Dan. "It will be a joke if it lets us all drap into the wather!"

"Shut up, Dan, an' help me shove her off. Take thet pole in yer hand," directed Babe, pointing to a pole lashed to the raft, and evidently intended for the guidance of the raft.

Dan did as he was told, and as Babe threw off the line from the rock, the unwieldy craft swung around into the turbulent stream.

"Be jabbers, she's goin' down the strame."

"Where wull we bring up Oi'd loike to know," said Dan.

The three horses were used to all sorts of experiences that would not befall horses in other and older parts of the country, and they did not appear to think it queer that they should be tossed about on a raft in mid-stream, with no immediate prospect of reaching shore. They were perfectly docile.

Steer with thet pole, Dan. Or—hyar let me take it. I guess I'm more used ter it," said Babe.

"Indade, ye can hove it. Oi don't want it," replied Dan, glad to get rid of the long pole, that he had dug into the bed of the river, and that was threatening to knock him overboard, to say nothing of upsetting the raft.

Babe Vincent soon showed that he had a better idea of managing a craft of this kind than the Irishman, and in a few minutes the party were gradually nearing the other side, although of course considerably lower down the stream than the point from which they had started.

"Oi wonder how the ithers got over. Be gob, if they hod to do it this sort of way they can't be very far off," remarked Dan. "Eh, darlint? Phwat do ye say?"

He gave Marcia a playful dig in the side as he said this, but the old woman did not like familiarities, and that cruel knife of hers flashed ominously as Dan sprang back and almost fell into the water.

"Sacre!" hissed the old woman.

Babe laughed.

"Dan, you'd better not try to be too funny in ladies' society. It doesn't always pay, especially in the West."

"Indade, ye needn't tell me thot. Begorra, she's a devil."

The raft was not more than a dozen yards from the other shore now, when suddenly the crack of a rifle rung out, followed by half a dozen more shots in rapid succession.

The shots were some distance away, but in the clear air of that region a stranger might have thought they were much nearer than was actually the case.

Dan McPhelan fell into this error, for he started as if the bullets were in his immediate neighborhood.

"Owl! Oi thought Oi wuz shot!" he yelled. "Indade, Oi kin almost feel the bullets hittin' me in the neck."

Babe did not reply, but he looked grave. Instinctively he knew that Wild Pete and Bob Grant were near enough to be engaged in combat, and he felt that he ought to be there to take part in the fracas.

He applied all his strength to the pole, and with a tremendous shove, forced the raft up to the bank.

"Now, Dan. Take ther horses off."

Dan seized the bridles of his own and Babe's bronchos, but allowed Marcia to guide her own steed. He did not care to go within reach of her knife.

The horses struggled up the bank, with Dan and Babe behind them, when Marcia, with a wild cry of rage, gave her horse a cut with her whip, and galloped across the plain like a mad creature.

"Sharkey and Sue," cried Babe.

"Phwere?"

Dan saw that they were indeed within a quarter of a mile of them, and that Sharkey was holding the line that was fastened to the girl and was looking back to see whether the party intended to pursue him.

The movements of Marcia assured him that one, at least, meant to do so, and he gave a tremendous cut with his quirt to Sue's horse, and dug his spurs into his own, with a shout of defiance and triumph that made Dan's blood boil.

"Bad luck to yez! Oi'll catch yer if Oi hov to roide to the ind uv the wurld!" he shouted, and, before Babe could say a word, he, too, had spurred his horse and was tearing after Marcia.

Over to the left there was a ridge of rocky hills, and behind them could still be heard an occasional shot, as if there were trouble in that direction.

Babe Vincent hesitated for a moment. He did not know which way to go.

Three more shots, and the sound of Wild Pete's voice raised in anger, although he could not distinguish the words, decided him.

"I guess Dan will never leave 'em ez long ez he kin sit his horse," he muttered, "an' it's quite evident thet ther captain needs some help. I'll go ter him!"

Throwing himself upon his horse, who was still perfectly fresh, and good for a great deal of work before giving out, he turned in the direction of the rocks and galloped at almost the top of his speed. He might have gone a little faster, but he was too well used to horses not to know the importance of leaving something in his nag for a crisis, in case one should arise.

The wiry little broncho seemed to understand this, too, and he managed to keep up a good pace without distressing himself.

The firing had ceased now, and he could not hear any voices, but that did not reassure him. In fact, he looked upon it as rather a bad sign. A horrible apprehension crept over him, and made him grind his teeth and grip the butt of his revolver with deadly purpose.

"Ef that thar Bob Grant has wiped out Wild Pete I'll hang him inside uv two weeks," he hissed between his set teeth. I wouldn't keer so much ef ther captain was killed by er squar' man. It's what is liable ter happen ter any one. But he ain't goin' ter be done up by no coniaccker or rustler without some one payin' fer it."

He had reached the rocks by this time, and found himself in a narrow defile, of which one side, the right, was very high, while the left was lower. On the right side there were plenty of places where a foe could lurk in ambush, and now that the afternoon was getting late, there were shadows in this narrow pass that made it several degrees darker than on the open plain.

Babe proceeded cautiously, with a revolver in his hand, ready for anything that might turn up.

He had ridden several hundred yards when he came to a place where an upheaval of nature had thrown a number of huge boulders across the path, so that he would have to climb up the side of the canyon to get along any further.

"Git up," he chirruped to his horse, and the intelligent animal sprang upon a big flat rock that would enable it to step still higher.

As it did so, Babe's glance fell upon a jagged point a little to one side, and he reined up his horse with a convulsive movement that he could not help, as a low cry of dismay escaped his lips.

On the jagged point was a large blotch of blood, while by its side lay the black hat, the counterpart of his own, that Wild Pete had worn when he left the stables in Evanston.

CHAPTER XXI.

RUN TO EARTH.

DAN MCPHELAN kept close at the heels of Marcia's broncho in the wild ride over the plain.

Sam Sharkey looked over his shoulder occasionally, but whenever he did so he saw that his pursuers were coming after him, relentlessly and with no slackening of their pace.

All four horses had settled down to a long, stretching gallop, such as they could have sustained for a long time without distress.

Sharkey could not distinguish the features of the two people who were following him, but their forms were familiar to him. He knew that one was the old woman who would follow him to perdition to obtain possession of the girl, and he had a pretty strong suspicion that her companion was the Irishman of whose pluck and determination he had already had proof.

"Cuss 'em!" he muttered between his teeth. "I'll hev ter try all ez I know ter keep away from them. Thet old woman is er terror, an' ther tenderfoot with her will give me trouble onless I kin git ther drop on him an' stop his wind afore he hez er chance."

He looked at the girl at his side, who was so securely fastened on her horse that she could not move hand or foot.

"Sue, ef I take thet handkerchief off yer mouth will yer keep yer tongue still?" he asked.

The girl did not make any sign that she heard him except to turn her eyes upon him with an expression in which he could not help reading scorn that nothing could quench.

"She's ez spunky es er yearling bull," he muttered.

He rode on for some distance without repeating his question or saying anything to the girl. Then, as if actuated by a sudden impulse that was too strong to be resisted, he leaned over toward her, and, with one twitch removed the handkerchief from her mouth.

The girl rode on as impassive as ever without making any remark about his action.

"Sue," he said, sheepishly.

"Wal?"

"I'd like ter untie yer from the saddle. Will ye promise me to keep still ef I do?"

"I won't promise yer nothin'."

"Um!"

A pause, during which Sharkey looked over his shoulder and satisfied himself that the pursuers were not gaining on them at all.

"Sue."

"Wal?"

"D'yer see who is behind us?"

The girl looked into his face with a terrified expression and then glanced over her shoulder.

She uttered a cry of dismay.

Sharkey was quick to perceive his advantage.

"Ef they ever catch up ter us, you know what will happen, don't yer?" he asked, with an evil grin.

"Marcia!" she whispered to herself.

"You know thet ther old woman will never let yer out uv her power, an' thet yer'd better be in ther hands uv ther orneriest set uv Indians in ther country than in hers, don't yer?" he persisted.

"Yes! Oh, yes!"

"Wal, then, will yer be quiet ef I untie yer, an' ride like the deuce to git away?"

There was a ring of triumph in his tones that he could not repress.

The girl looked over her shoulder, and she thought she could see the yellow teeth and the black eyes of the hag threatening her as she came on at a steady pace, with a relentless determination that suggested her being more fiend than woman.

Sue saw that there was a man with her, and recognized him as Dan McPhelan, but she had no faith in his being able to help her against such a foe as Marcia.

"He's only er tenderfoot!" she muttered.

"What could he do?"

"Wal?" asked Sharkey, impatiently.

"Untie me."

That was all, but Sharkey knew that he could depend upon the girl as well as if she had promised him in so many words that she would do as he wished.

He pulled out the knot that held the lariat in place, and untwisting it with a dexterous movement, soon released the girl so that she could sit her horse easily, and control his movements with the skill that she naturally possessed.

It was now getting dark, and Sharkey felt sure that if he could only keep the relative distance between himself and the pursuers he would have no trouble in getting the girl clear away.

He had more than one reason for wanting to escape the clutches of Wild Pete's gang, as he mentally resolved that Dan McPhelan and the old woman must now be considered.

"They thought I didn't know thet this hyar gal owns more cattle than any one man on the whole Wyoming and Colorado range put together, I s'pose," he thought. "But Sam Sharkey hezn't been around Bob Grant's place all these months fer nothin', not much."

He looked back, with a thrill of satisfaction as he noted how fast the shades of evening were falling, and that he would soon be able to get to a place of safety, where, in the darkness, it would be almost impossible for any one to trace him.

"I don't know why Marcia and thet thar Irishman are pardners in' this hyar bizness, but I s'pose they must both be actin' fer Wild Pete this time. It's er queer combination, too," he said, in a low tone.

They had been racing over the plain, which for some miles had been as flat as a table, but now the ground was becoming hilly and broken, and Sharkey could see that a range of hills toward which he had been making his way was not far off.

"Hurry up er little, Sue. We are nearly

thar," he said, encouragingly, as he gave his horse a dig with one of his long spurs.

Sue mechanically struck her broncho with her quirt, and the two horses bounded forward.

They were kept at top speed for about a mile, and then Sharkey suddenly wheeled to the right, seizing the bridle of the girl's horse as he did so.

"Hyar we air," he cried, as he leaped to the ground, and led both horses into a recess behind some rocks, and then dragged them up a steep and rough path, partly shadowed by pines, and now as black as pitch, in the fast-gathering night.

Hardly had they reached this patch when they heard the voice of Marcia urging on her horse and grumbling to herself in her own delightful way.

Sharkey led the horses further up, and then turned them to the right again, and downward, finally bringing up in a comfortable cave that felt pleasantly warm after the ride through the chill night air.

He struck a match and lighted a lamp that hung against the wall, with a reflector, so that Sue could see into what sort of place she had been brought.

It was a room perhaps twelve feet square, apparently hewn out of the solid rock, barely furnished with a table, two old chairs, and two mattresses on opposite sides of the room, with plenty of blankets on each. There were a few common articles of crockery on a shelf, with some canned food of various kinds, and a small sack of flour on the floor beneath it.

"This is er little crib ez I keep fer my private use," explained Sam, with a grin, as he noticed the girl looking around inquiringly.

The girl raised her finger, as if cautioning him to listen.

"They're coming," she whispered, in a frightened tone. "Don't yer hear 'em?"

"Thet's what I do. Sure enough. Wal, let 'em poke about hyar, an' they'll never find us. I never knew any one ter git inter this hyar place yit, without they wuz brought hyar by some one ez wanted 'em ter come in," answered Sharkey, in a confident way.

He listened, nevertheless, and as he heard the scraping of hoofs on the rough ground within a few yards of where he and the girl stood, but separated from them by a solid wall, he could not help wondering whether the record would be broken, and whether the two people who were following him and the girl so relentlessly, might by chance stumble on the tortuous way into the cave.

Sue loosened her revolver, which she had retained, after her abduction by Sharkey, and as she examined it to make sure that it was properly loaded and that the cartridges were in good condition, there could be no doubt that Marcia would be likely to pay with her life for an intrusion upon the hiding-place.

"You don't think thet they kin find ther way in, eh?" she asked of her companion.

"I'd give 'em er thousand dollars ef they could," was the confident reply.

Sue nodded, but she was not convinced.

"It wuzn't much trouble fer us ter git in, an' I couldn't see thet ther entrance wuz hid in any way," she remarked.

"Thet's ther very pint. Ef anybody wuz ter stumble over thet thar track, he would not hev any idee thet it led ter anywhere. It looks so darned innercent thet it ketches everybody. Savy?"

Sharkey chuckled to himself as he thus spoke, and, taking out his pistol, he examined it with the air of one who was looking at his weapon merely from curiosity, and not because he might have to use it soon.

"I kin still hear them out thar," said the girl, after a pause, during which she had been straining her ears to catch every sound.

"Don't bother 'bout them. They won't come in. Ef they should, yer see thet yer hev er clear shot at 'em fer two or three minutes afore they kin git at yer. See?"

He pointed out that, from the peculiar conformation of the place, any one approaching the cave would have to offer themselves as a target to the inmates long before the intruders had any idea they were so near.

"Mightn't ther horses give us away? Ef they wuz ter make any noise, thet 'ud lead them right down on us," suggested Sue.

"No fear. They're quiet enough."

Indeed, the two well trained animals were standing in the entrance to the cave without making any sign that they knew of the proximity of others of their race, although the heavy breathing of the horses ridden by Dan McPhelan and Marcia was distinctly audible.

Sharkey took a bag of oats from a corner, and, stepping to a recess just behind the horses, fetched out some hay, which he gave to the horses, who attacked their food with a will. Then he went outside the cave a few steps, to where the trickling of water could be plainly heard, and whence he brought two pails of water, one large and the other small. The large one was for the use of the horses, who emptied it between them, one waiting for the other to drink his half with a good nature not often seen in horses in cities, who never know the want of water as do these bronchos sometimes.

Sam Sharkey appeared satisfied now that Sue would not attempt to escape him so long as she feared that Marcia was in the vicinity, and he set about preparing supper for her in a matter-of-fact way peculiar to men who are accustomed to making the best of everything.

He did not make coffee or cook anything, because he was afraid to light a fire while people who wanted to unearth him were in the neighborhood. But he gave Sue a very comfortable meal of bread, canned tongue and preserves, with plenty of the freshest of spring water, and she was fain to admit to herself that the meal was as good as she wanted under the circumstances.

The sounds of horses outside had ceased for some time, and they had not heard anything more of the voices of either Marcia or Dan McPhelan.

"I guess they hev gone on up ther canyon, or else they air skeddaddling over ther plain," observed Sharkey, with his mouth full of supper. "Wal, it's all right. We'll look around in the morning an' see what is ter be done next."

"What d'yer expect ter do with me?" asked Sue, looking at Sam in some curiosity.

"Marry yer," was Sharkey's blunt reply.

"Oh!"

"Not another word was spoken until, supper finished, the man pointed to one of the mattresses—that furthest from the entrance to the cave—and remarked, cursorily:

"Thet's whar you air ter sleep."

"Oh!"

Sue examined the blankets, saw that they were passing clean, and, getting under them, lay down on the mattress, and feeling that her revolver was ready to her hand, dropped asleep almost immediately.

CHAPTER XXII.

SHARKEY CATCHES A TARTAR.

Sue went to sleep very easily, and could remain unconscious in spite of all kinds of sounds that might be made by those around her, provided they were what may be called legitimate sounds.

Sam Sharkey moved about the cave, arranging his dishes and putting away the food. Then he looked at the horses, and hitched them by their lariats to the legs of the table, so that they had plenty of room to move around, and yet could not stray without waking him. He looked approvingly at the horse who laid down, as if considering him an animal of superior intelligence, and then arranging his own mattress near the entrance to the cave, with the horse as a sort of barrier, he turned out the lamp and also lay down.

Sue slept all through these performances, although Sam was not particularly careful to be quiet, feeling sure that the pursuers were far enough away by this time, and knowing that they could neither see the light nor hear him, unless they managed to get so near that he must have seen them first.

The light was hardly out when the snoring of Sam Sharkey gave solemn warning that he was asleep.

For some time all was quiet. The second horse had followed the example of his companion and was lying on the hard floor, getting as much rest as he could under the circumstances, and the whole scene, if there had been light enough for any one to see it, was one of rest and peace.

The saddles had been taken from the horses, and were piled up by the side of

Sam Sharkey, so that he could not have been seen at first glance by any one entering the cave, even supposing, as before remarked, that there had been light.

Sue was sleeping without making any sound save a low breathing that was inaudible save to one who had bent over her to listen. She was sleeping the sleep of youth and innocence, and that is always peaceful and noiseless.

But now, what is that sound in the very dead of night?

Surely—surely, there is something moving in the cave!

It is neither Sue or Sharkey, and it is not the horse!

No! The something is a human form, and it has entered the cave stealthily and glided over in the direction of the girl!

Sharkey and Sue slept on!

The mysterious being, whatever it is, gropes its way between the horses, avoids the heaped-up saddles, and passes Sam Sharkey so close that it could have placed its foot on his mouth!

It is black dark in the cave, but the midnight visitor seems to possess some sixth sense that prevents its stumbling against anything and therefore awakening the inmates of the cave.

Slowly the being makes its way to Sue's side, and then, with a slight rustle, such as would be made by one drawing something from a pocket, throws a round spot of light full upon the girl's face.

For a moment the light remains there, and then disappears.

The form remains still for a minute, as if it were thinking.

Then the circle of light is thrown once more upon the sleeper's face, and an observer would have seen that the light came from a small pocket lantern, with such a strong lens that the smallest speck of flame was magnified dozens of times until it became a strong flood of light.

Sue moved uneasily, and then opened her eyes.

As she did so, the circle of light was flashed from her own face to that of the mysterious being bending over her.

An exclamation of horror trembled on the girl's lips, and then seemed to be frozen there.

She could not utter a sound!

The face upon which the light of the lantern shone broke into an evil smile, and the dark eyes glittered like those of a serpent.

The face with the glittering eyes was that of Marcia, the hag.

For several seconds the old woman held the lantern so that the light shone full on her face as she gazed balefully at the girl.

How she had found her way into the cave and what her intentions were did not appear, but Sue knew full well that there was evil in store for herself.

She could not cry out. Had she been able to do so she would, for much as she hated Sam Sharkey, she would rather have trusted herself to him than to the tender mercies of this fearful old woman.

"At last!" hissed Marcia, as the yellow fangs in her mouth were revealed more fully in a fiendish smile.

Sue did not respond in words, but there was a faint quiver of her eyelids, like one in a nightmare striving to break away from its influence, in vain.

"Yer thought yer could get away from the best friend you had, eh? *Sacre!*" She snarled.

Still Sam Sharkey slept on, and the girl was wholly in the power of this terrible creature with the beady eyes and night-black hair.

"Get up!"

Although these words were spoken in a low, hissing whisper, they might have been trumpet-tongued judging by their effect on the girl.

Marcia drew back a little, still holding the lantern toward her own face. She seemed to want to let the girl see her all the time, her own vision being keen enough to enable her to see the girl without light, if necessary.

Sue, with a straining gaze fixed upon the old woman's face, arose slowly from her mattress, and followed Marcia with gliding steps, as the latter retreated backward.

Marcia now waved her hands in a peculiar

manner between her own face and that of her victim, and Sue's face and gaze became even more set and strained.

Without looking behind her, the old woman backed toward the doorway of the cave, avoiding all obstructions, and not making the slightest sound.

The girl walked after her, never removing her eyes from those of the hag, and evidently held by some power that was utterly irresistible, as well as hateful.

"It was a weird, strange scene."

This awful-looking old woman, with a small circle of light on her weazened features, walking backward; while the bright, fresh young girl followed her with a look like that of a sleep-walker, and entirely under the thrall of the other. The horses, lying on the floor, looked up in lazy curiosity as the light caught their eyes, but they did not care enough about it to raise their heads. Then, so close to the old woman, that he could have touched her as she passed, was Sam Sharkey, in a heavy sleep, and utterly unconscious that the girl whom he would have fought with the arch-fiend to keep out of Marcia's clutches, was being spirited away, a helpless prisoner.

Marcia did not care anything about the picturesque and wild features of the proceedings, however. All she wanted was to get the girl, and she was chuckling inaudibly to herself over the success of her maneuvers.

There could be no doubt that Sue was as firmly held by some mysterious power possessed by the old woman as if she had been clasped in solid bands of steel.

In plain words, Marcia possessed an indomitable will, and she had hypnotized the girl completely.

The occult influence had been used over the girl before, but it was effective only when the two people were in each other's presence. Fortunately for Sue, Marcia could not affect her from a distance. If she could, the girl would never have been safe.

Sue knew that if Marcia managed to get close to her, and could once fasten those terribly beady eyes on her, there would be no use in her trying to resist the evil power.

Although Sue was hypnotized now, she yet managed to preserve the knowledge that she was under a power that was not for her good, and she was therefore struggling against it even while obeying the movement of her captor.

Marcia waved her hands at intervals as if to maintain the power she had already gained, and Sue could not break away.

"*Sacre!* Never again will I let you go!" muttered the hag, as she noted the ineffectual struggles of Sue to release herself. Ha! You're too useful! You have too much money! Marcia must have it! And," she added, with a sudden ferocity gleaming in her eyes, "she will have it, if she has to kill you!"

Sue could not answer. Indeed, she hardly comprehended the purport of Marcia's words, in the semi-unconscious state she was in.

Marcia had now reached the door of the cave, and was drawing the girl out into the narrow pathway, that Sam Sharkey had boasted was so arranged that any one in it must be seen by the occupants of the cave ten minutes before they could get down.

The old woman disappeared from the cave, and almost immediately afterward Sam Sharkey awoke.

He seemed to be broad awake on the instant.

Revolver in hand, he leaped to his feet and dashed toward the doorway, in pursuit of something the nature of which he could not tell but that he was sure existed.

Intuitively he knew that the thing that had disturbed him had some connection with the taking away of Sue.

It was so dark that he could not distinguish anything in the cave, but no sooner had he reached the entrance than his gaze fell upon something that filled him with superstitious horror.

Just above him, and too far away for him to touch it, was a face in a circle of strong light that seemed to actually stand out from the surrounding blackness—the face of Marcia, the hag.

As has been explained already, the ap-

proach to the cave was so arranged that people going to and from it were in view for some time without being actually at the entrance.

Marcia had been leading the girl around the winding path, and even now had got a good start from the doorway.

But Sam Sharkey knew the cave and its approaches too well to be easily thrown off.

With a yell of rage, he rushed up the inclined path, following the doublings and windings like a fox.

"Durn yer old picter! Yer think yer kin beat Sam Sharkey at his own game," he growled. "Wal, we'll see!"

He could hear the movements of the old woman and girl just above him, and he made a vigorous jump forward to grasp them.

"Cuss yer! I hev yer now!" he yelled.

He had his arms around some one who was struggling to get loose, and who seemed to possess a great deal more strength than he had bargained for.

"Keep still, yer old she-devil!" he howled, "or I'll shoot er hole through yer right hyar!"

"Will you? Wal, be jabers, an' it's me-self thot wull hove summat to say about thot, d'ye moind?" exclaimed a voice, that he recognized, but that was not that of Marcia.

"Who ther deuce air you?" yelled Sam Sharkey.

"Who did yez think Oi wuz, but Dan McPhalin!" came the cheerful reply, as the speaker tore himself loose, and, by a clever wrestling trick, threw Sharkey on his back on the hard rocks with a thump that made all his bones ache at once.

CHAPTER XXIII.

INTO A HORNETS' NEST.

LET us return to Wild Pete.

When he went into the loft, head-first, through the little window, he was prepared for trouble.

That Bob Grant or some of his gang were in the stable there could be no doubt, because they had given proof of their presence by firing.

"This hyar is whar I make or break, I guess," was the muttered remark of Wild Pete, as he found himself on the floor of the loft, having tumbled in neck and heels, as it were.

It seemed as if he were to break, for he had not regained his feet when he received a punch in the back of his neck that rolled him over and made him see stars.

He was too agile to lose his presence of mind and control of himself all at once, however, and the very action of rolling him over brought him right side up before his foe who had dealt the unexpected blow could get away.

It was none other than Bob Grant, and Wild Pete sprung at him like a beast of prey.

Bob was a man of quick movements, and he did not wait to receive the fist that was flung out straight from the shoulder, and that would have landed on the point of his jaw like a sledge-hammer had he received it.

"Not much," he yelled, as he leaped to one side, and warded off the thump, delivering in reply a swinging right-hander that caught Wild Pete full in the chest and made him grunt.

The detective was now mad as a tiger. The blow from the other's fist had the effect of stirring up his anger more than would have been the case had he received a bullet or a knife-stab, strange as it may seem.

He straightened up, and throwing himself into the most approved pugilistic attitude, struck out right and left, and got home on each cheek of his antagonist in quick succession, with resounding raps that seemed almost to shake the building.

"Cuss ye!" howled Grant, in mingled pain and rage.

Wild Pete had clasped him around the neck, and now had him in what is known as "chancery," with his head held so tightly that he could not move, allowing the detective to punch him to his heart's content.

He had already received one blow that drew the blood from his nose, when some one else jumped upon the back of Wild Pete

and pulled him back so far that Bob Grant managed to tear himself loose.

Then there was a scuffle, and a shot was fired so close to the detective that the flash almost blinded him and singed his long hair.

Temporarily dazed by this sudden change of tactics and by the flash of the pistol, Wild Pete could not see what was going on for the moment.

"Durn those fellers! They're all hyar, seems to me," he muttered.

He caught sight of a white head just disappearing down the spiral staircase in the corner, and he fired two shots at it so quickly that it disappeared with increased celerity, and only just in time.

"Almost put er bullet through him," was Wild Pete's mental comment. "I'm afraid sometimes I'll hev ter take this hyar gang dead, after all. They're so durned slippery thet I can't hold 'em."

He dashed away toward the staircase, and just caught a glimpse of the white head in a corner of the stable, but had hardly done so when it vanished in a most mysterious manner, as if the floor had opened and swallowed it.

"Thet's jist about what it hez done, I guess," he muttered. "Wal, thet's all right. I kin go after it."

He was down the winding stairs and standing over the spot where he had last seen the white head.

"All right, Wintry Jim. I think I begin ter see inter this hyar thing. You ain't so good at coverin' yer tracks ez yer think you air, arter all."

He had caught sight of the large iron ring, that had been left uncovered by sawdust by Bob Grant and Wintry Jim, who had evidently gone this way.

Wild Pete fumbled at the iron ring for a moment, for he did not strike the knack of the spring at once, but it soon yielded, and then he found himself in the inclined passage described in a previous chapter, and through which there was a gust of air that told him there would be nothing to prevent his reaching the street by that means.

He filled the two chambers of his revolver that he had emptied after Wintry Jim, and then ran boldly along the passage in the dark.

No sooner had he reached the street than he saw Bob Grant and Wintry Jim riding at a gallop toward the open country.

"Thet's all right. Ride away. But ef you fellers kin git away from me when I go after yer on Diablo, you air welcome to go."

A minute's walk brought him to a small frame building a little further out toward the plain. He opened the door of the building with a key he carried and revealed a comfortable stable, and two horses.

One of them was a magnificent black stallion, with wild, staring eyes that threatened any one venturing in his vicinity, but that softened as they gazed upon Wild Pete.

"Wal, Diablo, air yer ready fer ter run?"

The magnificent animal whinnied in a low tone, and stepped toward the detective as if glad to see him.

"Thet's right, old boy! All you wanted wuz ter be handled right," observed Wild Pete, with a feeling of pride that he could not repress, as he saw how completely the fierce animal was under his control.

He had tamed Diablo thoroughly on the morning when it had been so hard a matter to determine whether man or horse was to be master, and Diablo was the slave of his bidding for the rest of his life, no matter where they might be.

The detective took the saddle from the corner and adjusted it, with lariat and other accessories, and then, giving Diablo a tap with the back of his hand as a signal for him to walk outside, followed him, and, turning the key in the door after a glance at the other horse to make sure that he was all right, leaped upon the back of the stallion and turned him in the direction of the Bear River, which had been almost reached by Bob Grant and Wintry Jim by this time.

"Now, Diablo, let's see what yer kin do."

Just a touch with the quirt accompanied these words, and Diablo sped away like the wind.

It would not take long to catch Bob Grant and Wintry Jim if this rate of speed were kept up, and Wild Pete looked to his pistol to make sure that was ready for the fray that

must inevitably take place when he overtook the two men.

"I'll jist chap them in jail in Evanston without any more foolishness," he said to himself and Diablo—for he was taking the horse into his confidence as naturally as if the animal had been a human creature.

Diablo tossed his head at the sound of his rider's voice, and there was a noticeable increase in his gait for the moment, as if he felt encouraged by being addressed.

"I'd rather trust yer than many men I know, Diablo," went on the detective. "I wonder whar them rascals put thet stuff. I s'pose it's back thar in ther house somewhar. It's sure thet they hev not got it with them, anyhow, or I'd see it."

Then a thought struck him, and he pulled up Diablo with such a sudden movement that that sagacious creature must have wondered what it all meant.

"Wild Pete, you're er dandy!" exclaimed the detective, as he turned in his saddle and looked behind him.

He had just thought of Dan McPhehn and Babe Vincent, whom he had left in the house without any consideration in the excitement of his finding the ranchman and Wintry Jim in the stable.

"Now, what shall I do?" he mused. "If I go back I'll lose sight uv these hyar rascals. And yet, it don't seem like givin' them er squar' deal to let them stay thar while I'm hevin' all ther fun."

He was in a quandary. Even while he paused the men he was after had reached a bluff and were just turning out of sight on the bank of the river, and he knew that if he was to keep them well in hand he must keep up his pursuit close on their heels.

"They're too slippery to let them out uv my sight. I'm pretty well sure thet Bob Grant means ter jump ther country ez soon ez he kin git things ter rights."

As he thus expressed his fears something caught his eye that made him forget all about Dan and Babe in an instant.

"What does thet mean?" he cried, as he looked across the plain to the right of the spot where he had last seen Bob Grant and Wintry Jim disappearing behind the rocks.

Sam Sharkey and Sue rushing away at top speed!

Now came the struggle in Wild Pete's mind that Babe knew had taken place when he saw that there were two parties both of whom the detective would like to have followed.

"I ought to go after thet gal, especially now I know thet thar is so much depending upon her safety," he muttered, "but I can't afford ter let Bob Grant git away."

He sat on his horse, irresolute, for a minute at least. Then, as if he had made up his mind, he shook the reins and set Diablo in the direction in which Grant and Wintry Jim had gone, but not without casting many a glance after the flying figures of Sam Sharkey and Sue, who soon became mere specks in the distance, as he rode away from them.

He reached the river-side at last, but nothing was to be seen of the men he was after.

"They must hev 'crossed. Wal, hyar goes! Now, Diablo!"

The horse plunged into the turbulent yellow stream and swam with a strength that was almost wonderful for the other shore, Wild Pete having stood up in the saddle, on which he was balancing himself with the skill of a circus-rider, so that only his high boots were wet.

Diablo made short work of crossing the river. As he reached the shore Wild Pete sprang to the ground, and pulled at the bridle to help his noble steed up the bank.

"You're er good one, Diablo," he murmured, as he patted the sleek black neck and looked into the expressive eyes. "Er feller hez something he kin depend on w'en he hez er horse like this."

He threw himself into the saddle and bore down on the defile before mentioned.

"This looks like er good place fer er feller ter git er bullet afore he knows it. I'll hev ter keep er sharp lookout ef I'm goin' ter keep my hide sound," he observed philosophically.

The words were hardly out of his lips when there was a crack that he knew to be that of a rifle.

"Casar! They're at me at long range, eh? All right, Mr. Robert Grant, 'this will

count one more against ye when I do git my clutches on yer carcass."

Instinctively he sought cover under the brow of a large overhanging rock, which completely sheltered both man and horse.

Dismounting, he took up his station behind his horse, so that he was protected from the attacks of any one who might be above him, and then looked over Diablo's back.

He could not see a sign of a human being, but a thin spiral of blue smoke behind a rock high on the right told him that his foe was in that neighborhood.

Suddenly he let go with his revolver as he caught sight of a moving something that he knew to be the top of a hat.

The distance was too far for a revolver to do effective work, but his shot was replied to by another crack from the rifle, and a bullet flattened itself on the rock behind him with a spiteful ping.

"Ah! Thet means bizness! Wal, we'll hev ter git out uv this, Diablo!" he observed, coolly.

He had seen that there was a chance to climb up the defile without going out any further, and he turned the stallion's head in the direction of the opening that he had noticed behind him.

Twisting and stumbling along, but always upward, Diablo made his way along, and Wild Pete, with his cocked revolver ready, was on the lookout for an enemy who he knew would be more likely to announce his presence with a bullet than in any other way.

He had proceeded some distance without interruption, when suddenly there was the ring of a shot that he recognized as that of a revolver, and his hat was knocked off his head, as a furrow was made across his forehead, letting a stream of blood run down his face.

He dashed his hand across his face and blazed away at Bob Grant, who was so sure that he had settled the detective, that he came out and offered himself as a good target for the detective's revolver.

It was a fortunate thing that the blood had run into Wild Pete's eyes enough to make his aim less sure than usual. As it was, his bullet went through the fleshy part of Bob Grant's right arm and made him drop his revolver.

"Cuss him! Wintry, come hyar!" howled Grant.

Then there was another shot, and Wild Pete felt the sting of a flesh wound in his leg, although his experience told him that it was not serious.

But it made him mad, and he was off Diablo's back and struggling with Wintry Jim before that gentleman was prepared for the onslaught.

Wild Pete had drawn his bowie-knife now, and, as he closed with his adversary, he managed to drive the blade into his arm, so that he bled copiously and yelled like a stuck pig.

"What's ther matter with yer?" bawled Bob Grant, as he seized Wild Pete behind in an iron grip, and before he could offer resistance, being occupied with Wintry Jim, the detective found himself entangled in a lariat, and the next moment was on his back, with Wintry Jim's knee in his chest, while Bob Grant coolly finished the work of tying him hand and foot.

"Now, Wild Pete, I think it would hev been better ef you hed gone ter yer friend in Chicago, Israel Gruensfeldt!" hissed Bob Grant, with a mocking grin.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN UNKNOWN FRIEND.

DIABLO had been standing quietly by during the struggle of Wild Pete with his enemies.

He did not realize what was going on, or there is no doubt that he would have assisted the man he had learned to regard as his master.

"Lead that cussed brute over hyar, Wintry," ordered Bob Grant. "We can't stay hyar, and we may ez well let him ride his own horse, especially ez thar is er chance uv ther critter throwin' him off an' breakin' his durned neck afore we git ter ther ranch," he added, in a low tone.

Wintry Jim turned his one eye in the direction of Diablo, and stepped toward that animal with a caution that was hardly in

accordance with his usual demeanor. To give Wintry Jim his due, he was not lacking in courage, as a general thing.

Wild Pete, helpless as a trussed chicken, was looking curiously at Diablo.

The detective noticed a twitching of the ears and a showing of a good deal of white of the eye in the stallion, and he drew his own conclusions from these signs.

"Thar's trouble fer somebody, ef I know anything about that thar horse," he murmured.

Wintry Jim walked up to the stallion and seized the bridle.

As he did so Diablo swung around and lashed out with his hind feet in such a vicious manner that, had not Wintry Jim been a remarkably agile man, he would have ended his career at that moment.

Wild Pete could not help laughing, and even Grant condescended to smile grimly.

"What's ther matter, Wintry? You don't seem ter be er favorite uv his, do yer?" he asked, mockingly.

"Cussed brute! He remembers me!" answered Wintry Jim, keeping a respectful distance from the stallion.

"What d'yer mean?"

"Oh, nothin'."

"Wal, why does he remember yer?"

Wintry Jim maintained a sulky silence, looking at Diablo as if he would have enjoyed firing half a dozen rifle bullets into him.

"Go on, Wintry. Bring him over, and help me put this feller on his back," commanded Bob Grant, peremptorily. "This is bizness, not foolishness."

"I'm afraid," confessed Wintry Jim.

"What?"

Bob Grant looked at him incredulously. He could not believe it.

"Fact!"

"Wal, I'll be— What are yer afraid uv?"

"I'll tell yer. I hed occasion ter lick this yer horse one day, an' he ain't forgot it. Thet's all."

"I wonder he let yer lick him. An' ef yer could lick him afore, why can't yer do it now?"

There was a sheepish expression in Wintry Jim's evil face, as he answered in a low tone:

"He wuz tied then."

"Oh!"

Bob Grant led Diablo over himself now, and looking at Wild Pete a moment, saw that it would be impossible for him to mount unless his legs were released from the rope. So he coolly unwound the lariat from the lower part of the detective's body, and motioned to him to get into the saddle.

Wild Pete's hands were still lashed tightly to his side, but that did not prevent his leaping upon Diablo's back with as much ease and grace as distinguished his movements at ordinary times.

"Now, whar to?" he asked, as coolly as if he were going to take a ride for pleasure.

"Never mind. It's none uv your bizness. I hev this hyar thing in charge," answered Bob Grant, gruffly.

Wild Pete was too proud to ask any more questions, even if he had known they would be answered. As it was, he knew that questions would be useless, as well as lowering to his dignity. So he wisely held his peace, and waited to see what would be the course of events.

Bob Grant led the way along the ravine, but instead of keeping straight along the bottom, they went up the side path and reached a terrace that ran up at a pretty stiff angle.

Wild Pete knew the country pretty well, and he wondered whether Bob Grant would have the assurance to go straight back to his ranch.

"Ef he does; he's er dead duck! 'Cause Babe will come thar sure, an' it will be good-by to Mr. Grant," soliloquized the detective, as he stole a sidelong look at the ranchman, as if to penetrate his intention.

But Bob Grant was riding in a matter-of-fact way, with his eyes under their lowering brows turned toward the western horizon, where the sun was sinking in a ball of red fire.

"Can't tell what he's thinking about. He's too smart to carry his intentions in his face," thought Wild Pete.

He was not particularly alarmed over the situation. For one thing, he had a hearty feeling of contempt for the ranchman and his gang, and considered himself a match for any three of them provided his hands were free. Moreover, he knew that Bob Grant would hesitate about murdering him in cold blood. A member of the United States Secret Service was too important an individual to put out of the way with impunity.

Wintry Jim rode a little behind, and on the other side of Bob Grant, so as to be away from the heels of Diablo, that the man feared might rear up at any moment, and cause trouble. He did not trust the horse to any extent, and he knew that if the stallion should get one good, hearty kick at him, it would more than likely render him unfit for duty for an uncomfortably long time.

The three men rode on in silence for perhaps two hours. Bob Grant was not in the mood for talking, and Wild Pete was rather anxious to hear some expressions from his captors than to make any remarks himself. As for Wintry Jim, he was naturally of a taciturn disposition, and rarely spoke unless some one addressed him.

Wild Pete was busy thinking, however, and as his pistol and bowie had not been taken from him, he felt sure that he would find some way of spoiling the plans of his two companions with regard to him, at some time or other.

The sun had disappeared long ago, and it was a dark night, although there were enough stars in the firmament to prevent the darkness being downright tiresome. On the open plain it was much lighter than in the ravine from which they had emerged, or rather, from which they had climbed, for they had come out of it long before reaching the end.

Wild Pete had taken advantage of the gloom to pull at the rope that held his hands down to his sides. The rope was stiff and tough, but he had managed to pull at it until it had yielded a little, so that he could work his hands around to the front, instead of their being stiff at his sides.

His object was to be able to grasp the bridle, so that he could direct the horse he rode. Once that done, he knew that he could depend upon Diablo to obey his slightest wishes.

He got his hands around at last, and was just reaching for the bridle, when Bob Grant, who had been watching him for the last few moments, took the end of the lariat in his hand, and, with an oath, pulled it taut, so that Wild Pete's hands were driven so tightly against his thighs that he could not repress a cry of pain.

"Ah! It hurts yer, does it? Wal, don't try any monkey business with Bob Grant, because it don't go, and you will find yerself in er worse fix than yer ever wuz."

The detective recognized that for the present he could not expect to escape, and he settled himself into his saddle with the philosophical determination to bear quietly what he could not help.

He knew that they were riding toward the ranch, and indeed they were just entering the canyon, which, it will be remembered, was the most direct route to the ranch.

"We'll soon be thar, Wintry," observed Bob Grant, in a tone of relief, as if he were glad to be nearly home again.

"Yes," was the sententious response of Wintry, who did not care particularly where he was.

"Ride on a little, Pete," commanded Grant, nodding to the detective.

"I can't do anything ter make ther horse go any faster unless you untie my hands."

The ranchman smiled grimly at the idea of letting Wild Pete loose, but he gave Diablo a cut with his whip to start him on, and the black horse dashed down the canyon at full speed in response to the hint, Wild Pete sitting in the saddle like a statue.

"Wonder whether Sharkey is goin' around ther other way with Sue," said Grant, as soon as the detective was out of hearing. "They wuz riding mighty close together when I see them last."

Wintry Jim smiled coldly.

"Pears ter me that Sharkey has tuk er strong notion ter ther gal," he observed.

"What? Thet ugly coyote? What d'yer mean?" demanded Grant, in a rage, as he

looked into his companion's face to see whether he meant what he said.

"Ef you can't see it, you're ther only one on ther range ez don't know it," replied Wintry Jim.

Bob Grant did not make any remarks for a minute or two. He was thinking over the behavior of Sam Sharkey to his niece, for the past few weeks, and then he cursed his own stupidity for not being able to see it before.

"Wal," he said, at last, "Marcia is with her, an' she'll shet down on any foolishness uv thet sort."

He dismissed the subject in this way, and then, putting spurs to his horse, dashed after Diablo, who had carried Wild Pete nearly to the end of the canyon by this time.

The three rode around to the corral, and Bob Grant helped Wild Pete from the back of Diablo, and held him by the arms, as Wintry Jim turned the horses into the inclosure.

Then he walked away to the secret entrance to the cellar by way of the cave where the reader was first introduced to Marcia.

"Hev ter shove him down hyar fer er while until we know what we air goin' ter do with him, I s'pose," whispered Grant to Wintry Jim, as they walked along.

"I s'pose," answered Wintry Jim, carelessly.

The stars had been covered by some gathering clouds, so that, on that account, and on that of their being under the shadow of the rocks, it was very dark.

But for this fact, perhaps, Grant or Wintry Jim, or both, would have noticed that a man crept out from a huge boulder as they passed it and tugged the sleeve of Wild Pete's coat on the side opposite to that held by the ranchman, as a voice whispered in his ear:

"Keep awake!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A WILD SHRIEK.

SUE, held firmly in the mysterious thrall of the old woman's dark eyes, was compelled to follow Marcia out of the cave and up the steep winding path to the plain.

There were several avenues to the cave besides that by which Sam Sharkey and the girl had approached it, which accounts for Marcia and Sue not meeting Dan McPhelan as he stumbled upon the place by accident.

The old woman walked backward all the way, occasionally making a few passes with her hands to maintain her hold over her victim, while Sue, with a despairing expression in her face, obeyed the power she could not resist.

Almost unconsciously she mounted the horse which Marcia had ridden, and then the old woman, in a cold, hard voice, like one repeating a lesson, said:

"You will sit on this horse, and you will ride slowly out till I come. That you will do."

The girl did not answer. The power of speech was denied her now that she was in the peculiar psychological state into which the old woman had forced her, but she obeyed mechanically, and touching the horse's neck with the whip that hung at the saddle, she agitated the bridle a little, and the horse moved off at a walk.

Then the old woman went boldly back into the cave.

"I must have ze horse," she muttered. "Sacre! I must have ze horse!"

In the darkness she made her way silently and swiftly into the cave, where Dan McPhelan and Sam Sharkey were locked in each other's arms on the floor, trying to decide which was the stronger.

She knew exactly the position of the horses, and she did not need a light. She walked straight to them, and putting her hand on the neck of the animal nearest to the doorway, she leaped on his back, and giving him a cut with the whip, was galloping up the winding path before the combatants realized that any one besides themselves was in the cave.

Sharkey was the first to recover himself. "Leggo uv me, yer durned foo! Thar goes ther gal!" he yelled.

"Phwat gurr!" demanded Dan, doggedly, as he gripped his foe in a tighter embrace. "Bad 'cess ter yez! Phwat are yez guvin' me?"

"It's Sue, I tell yer!"

"Phwat?"

Dan let go of Sam Sharkey's neck, and was on his feet in an instant, tumbling against the remaining horse in the darkness.

"Thet cussed old woman hez been hyar. I saw her face in er little patch uv light. And she's taken away Sue. Thet's what!"

"Faix, Oi guess you're roight. Oi know she come this way, an' Oi lost her jist as she came to this part of the wurruld."

Sam Sharkey had arisen and was lighting a match. He lighted the lamp against the wall, and then glanced eagerly toward the couch where Sue had been lying.

It was empty, and only confirmed his almost certain knowledge.

"I'll find her, wherever she is!" he hissed, "and I'll kill that old woman."

"Ye will? Then, begorra, Oi'll go wid yez to see the foon."

There was no use in fighting with Sharkey now, thought Dan. The first thing was to rescue Sue, and he could attend to his quarrel with Sam afterward.

Sam was already on his horse and riding out of the cave when Dan was looking for his own horse, that he had left near the entrance to the pathway. He found it where he had left it, and before Marcia and Sue had got very far away on their road to the ranch, Sam Sharkey and Dan McPhelan were riding after them, actuated by one purpose in the present instance, but deadly enemies in everything else.

Sharkey was pretty sure where Marcia would go, but Dan's only idea was to go with his companion. He had no notion which way Marcia would ride, nor did he care. All he wanted was to save the girl. There was a feeling as chivalrous in the young Irishman's breast as could beat in human bosom, and he would have given his life for that young girl, although he had only known her two or three days.

Sue was still in the hypnotic condition, and Marcia took care it should not be lessened. While she had the girl thus she could do anything she wished with her.

"When I get you home, my lady, make you pay for ze trouble you give me," she hissed once, as she rejoined her with her own horse, and that was the only word she spoke.

As the old woman expected, she had not proceeded very far when she detected the sound of horses' feet behind her; but so far behind that she was not afraid of being overtaken. She knew that there was plenty of go in the horses ridden by the girl and herself, and she also knew that neither Sam nor his companion could ride any faster than herself.

It was well toward the morning when Marcia arrived at the ranch and went into the lower part of the house by the same path that had been taken by Wild Pete and his captors a few hours before.

As she reached the cave she could not resist the temptation to give the girl a slap in the face that brought a red spot to the delicate cheek, but did not elicit a cry, for the girl had not the power to make a sound. Even could she have done so, it is not probable that she would, for it was not her way to let her enemies see that she was hurt. And Marcia was her enemy in the full meaning of the word.

When, half an hour later, Sam Sharkey and Dan McPhelan rode up, the whole place was as quiet as if no one had been astir since the evening before, when the cowboys had finished their work and retired in the regular way.

Wild Pete and Sue had both been placed out of sight below the house, and, if there was any noise down there, it could not be distinguished outside, where Sam Sharkey led his own horse to the corral, in a disgusted frame of mind as to the man, and very tired as to the horse.

"You'd better go ter bed, I should think," he observed to Dan. "I wouldn't let ther boss know what capers yer hev been kickin' up ther last twenty-four hours, either, ef I wuz you," he added, significantly.

"Thank yez for nothing," answered Dan. "Oi know me biz."

"I only told yer fer yer own good," was Sam Sharkey's careless remark, as he entered the house by the back way and tumbled into an empty berth in the front room.

Dan McPhelan walked into the corral with

his horse and looked around it to see what animals were there.

Suddenly his eye fell upon a large horse, that was walking restlessly up and down, as if over-tired or nervous.

"Diablo, be the powers!" exclaimed Dan. "Oho! Then Wild Pete has got here, sure."

He stepped boldly up to the black horse, that did not repel his advances and felt his neck.

"Ah! He's warrum yit. Be jabers! He must have been ridden hard. Phwat a pity it is that a foine animal loike this can't talk. If he c'd, Oi'd know all about iverything. Well, Oi'll hev to thry an' foind out by me-self, so Oi wull."

He stood patting the sleek neck of the beautiful stallion while musing as to his next movement.

"Oi'm goin' to foind out something about the captain, Woild Pete, afore Oi go to slape, so Oi am. He's here, an' Oi want to see him."

The black horse looked at him wistfully, as if he would like to have told him what he desired to know. But Dan read the look differently, and probably correctly.

He wants some wather, an' he gob, he shall hev it," he observed as he went to the stable for a pail, and from thence to the spring, from which a glimpse of the front of the house could be obtained.

He had filled the pail and was on his way back to the corral when his quick eye caught the reflection of a ray of light in the dark sitting-room—a ray that appeared for but an instant, and then vanished.

"Oho! There's somethin' goin' on in there. There is, be jabers! Oi'll jest tek the wather to the horse, an' thin Oi'll go an' see phwat they be doin' in the house, so Oi wull."

Dan walked to the corral with his pail, but he managed to go near to the front of the house, as he did so.

All was dark in the front parlor, and he looked in vain for a return of the ray of light.

He gave the water to Diablo, and after stroking his neck and whispering a few words in his ear in his mellifluous brogue, made his way back to the house.

He might have entered the back way and gone straight to the bunk-room, as he would have done under ordinary circumstances, but he was bound to see what that ray of light meant, and moreover he could not go to sleep until he found out something about Wild Pete.

Dan McPhelan remembered that the detective had saved his life when Sharkey and the rest of the lynching party had the rope around his neck, and it is not in the Irish character to be ungrateful.

He stepped softly on the veranda, and tried to peer through the window into the dark sitting-room.

Everything was black within.

"Bad 'cess to it! Phwat shall Oi do?"

Even as he thus muttered to himself, there was a shriek as of some one in pain—a shriek that seemed to pierce the whole house, and then all was quiet, the silence being actually painful to the watcher on the veranda.

For a moment he listened, and then the cry was repeated, but muffled, as if a door interposed between him and the person who had uttered the scream.

Dan McPhelan was dazed at first, and then he recognized the voice.

"Sue, be the powers!" he shouted, as he dashed into the half-open doorway of the sitting room, with frenzied determination to rescue the girl, in spite of man or fiend.

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHERE THEY FOUND WILD PETE.

DAN MCPHELAN groped about the room, pistol in hand, falling over the chairs and tables, and in a flurry of impotent rage.

Not a creature could he find, and when the first mad burst of anger had subsided enough for him to think at all, he realized that he was only wasting precious time.

"She's not here. Phwat a fool Oi am! Oi might hov known thot. But, be hivins, Oi know phwere she is. An' Oi'll find her, in shpite uv the ould woman or any wan else."

He struck a match and looked around him. As he expected, the room was empty.

"Ah, sure Oi understhand all about it. Jist watch me, an' Oi'll show yez somethin', so Oi wull."

Dan spoke in a scarcely audible tone, and was not addressing any one in particular, but his words were overheard.

The match went out, and he placed his foot upon it, having taken his bearings while it was alight, so that he could go direct to what he intended to do.

Had he glanced behind him just before the match was extinguished, he would have seen that he was not alone!

A man had slipped quietly through the doorway from the veranda, and was so near Dan McPhelan that he could have touched him by merely stretching forth his hand.

Dan was utterly unconscious that he was not alone, however; in fact, he was thinking more about Sue's agonized cry than anything else, and having looked once around the room by the light of the match, he did not worry himself any more about the possibility of his having been watched. He was ready to fight all the people on the ranch for the sake of the bright young girl who had made such a strong impression upon his susceptible heart.

"Faith, Oi wonder whether Oi kin open this dure in the mantel," he thought, as he groped over to it. "Oi only saw the captain worruk it wance, but be gob Oi t'ink Oi can do it."

He was even more successful than he had hoped, for at the first touch he struck the right spot under the mantel where the spring was concealed, and a sharp pull brought the loose portion of the wood away, and he felt the cool air blowing in his face.

"Now, ye shpalpeens, yez want to look out, for Dan McPhalin wull be among yez afore ye know phwere ye are!"

He walked boldly down the stairs, although he felt his way cautiously, to save himself from going down headlong. He had never entered the cellar by this way, and he did not know exactly where he would bring up.

"Now, if Oi only knew phwereabouts the ould woman wuz, Oi'd be all roight. But, faith, there's so many turns an' twishts in this place, Oi may get lost afore Oi foind her."

Dan did not give audible vent to his thoughts, for he did not know how soon he might come across some of the gang, but it was only by the exercise of considerable self-control that he kept his tongue quiet. He always found that it helped him to talk to himself when he was puzzled. He wanted advice from some one, if it was only from himself, and the sound of his own voice often encouraged him.

Reaching the first small cellar at the foot of the stairs, he felt all the four walls, one after the other. He found the door leading to the other part of the underground regions unbarred and only just pushed to.

"Hal! Faix, they wuz in sooch a hurry thot they did not hov toime to shut the dure. Well, Oi'll be after thim in a hurry."

He had just begun to crawl along the passage, when something made him stop for a moment, and then dash swiftly on, with a curse on his lips and vengeance in his heart.

It was Sue's voice, raised in cries for mercy, punctuated with the sound of cruel blows, as of a whip.

"Murtherin' Moses! Oi'll tear the heart out uv thot ould woman!" howled Dan, nearly beside himself with rage.

"Gently, Dan! Don't get crazy," whispered a voice in his ear.

The Irishman recognized the voice at once, and without stopping to think that there was anything extraordinary in the speaker being at his side in that secret passage, answered:

"Thot's all roight, Babe Vincent. Oi hov a roight to be crazy, an' so has any dacent man whin there is such doings callin' for interference."

"Wal, I don't deny it," observed Babe Vincent, quietly. "Only we don't want ter sp'ile iverything by making any noise now."

"Foller me!" was Dan McPhelan's only response.

"Go on, Dan. I'm with yer."

The sound of the blows had stopped now, and the only reminder of them was conveyed

in the low sobs that broke upon their ears every now and then from behind the closed door at the end of the passage.

There was a slight turn in the passage before the door of the workshop was reached, and it was just as they reached this door that they saw there was a light in the room, and that the door was ajar.

"Babe!"

"Wal?"

"Ye are not afraid of ghosts, are yez?"

"What do yer mean?"

"Nothin', only if ye see any things in white, wid the faces uv carpses on ter thim, ye needn't be afraid. They're only men loike us, that's all."

"I'll remember what yer say."

Dan pushed open the door and glanced around. Then he rushed over to a corner, where in a huddled heap upon the floor behind a bench, he saw a woman.

"Howly saints pectect us!" he exclaimed, fervently.

He was raising the head of the young girl, Sue, who was lying in an insensible heap on the floor.

"She's in er faint," said Babe, as he took out his flask and rubbed her forehead with whisky.

The two men lifted the girl and laid her on a table, Dan supporting her head while Babe tried to revive her with the spirits.

In a few moments she opened her eyes and gave a convulsive shudder, as she looked from one to the other.

"Where is she?" she moaned. "Marcia!"

"The ould catamaran!" growled Dan between his set teeth.

"She whipped me! Oh, she whipped me!"

"Did she, darlint? Did she? Faith, Oi'll whip her whin Oi git my hands on her, so Oi wull," declared Dan, with a vigor that left no doubt of his intentions to do it thoroughly.

"Take er little uv this," said Babe, putting his flask to her lips. "It'll give yer strength."

Sue pushed the flask aside.

"No, no, no. I don't want it. I am better now." She hit me with the whip, but I don't care for that, if I kin only git erway so ez I will never see her ag'in. Thet's all I want. She came an' took me erway from Sharkey, but I'd rather trust myself with him than her. I ain't erfraid of no man," declared Sue, with energy, as she slipped from the table, and threw Dan's arm aside.

"Pluck, I tell yez," whispered Dan, admiringly.

The girl was very weak, and she was compelled to cling to the table for support, even while speaking so bravely.

"Whar did you two fellers come from?" she demanded, suddenly, as she seemed to collect her scattered thoughts. "I didn't know you wuz anywhar 'round."

"Oi followed yez from that place whar ther ould woman tuk yer," explained Dan. "Oi trailed yez here, an' Oi wuz detarmined to git yez out uv her clutches somehow."

The girl put her soft brown hand in Dan's, and he felt a thrill run through him from his hair to his boots.

"Oi'd die fer yez," he said, simply, but the grateful glance of the girl showed that she knew him to be in earnest.

"Thanks, Dan. You air er durned 'good feller, ef yer air Irish."

There was a lamp alight on the wall, and it enabled them to see everything in the room. But there were no signs of the nefarious business carried on by Bob Grant and his gang, and Babe augured from this that the visit of Wild Pete had determined Bob Grant to stop his operations at the ranch for the time.

"Hev yer seen anything uv Wild Pete?" he asked, as he saw that the color was returning to the cheek of the girl, and moreover that she was examining her revolver, that the old woman had neglected to take from her.

Sue started, and she banged her little fist upon the table.

"What er fool I am," she exclaimed.

"But when Marcia gits me inter that state I seem ter fergit everything."

"Wal?" asked Babe, eagerly, as he saw that she had something to tell him.

"Wild Pete is thar."

She pointed to the door opposite to that by which they had entered.

"Whar is he?"

"He is in er place ez you would never find him," answered the girl, solemnly.

"Ah, I only hope you air not too late ter help him."

"What do yer mean?" demanded Babe, breathlessly. "Hev they wiped him out?"

"I dunno whether they hev yet, but yer kin take yer oath thet's what they will do. Bob Grant hez made up his mind ter git out uv this right away. You know he's only been running this ranch fer another man, an' he kin leave without losing anything. He only took it 'cause it gave him er good chance ter make bogus money."

"And you—"

Babe stopped when he had uttered these two words. There was a look in the girl's face that told him he was doing her a deadly injury by his half formed suspicion, and he was ashamed of it.

"Babe Vincent, you ain't knowed me very long, but it's long enough fer you ter be sure ez I ain't hed nothin' ter do with this hyar coniaeking. I larned all I know about this yer' thing within er day or two, an' yer kin take yer oath thet ef I'd knowed it afore, I'd never hev stayed, uncle er no uncle."

There was no mistaking the earnestness with which she spoke, and Babe would have apologized if she had not stopped with an imperious motion of her hand.

"Don't say nothin'," she said. "Thar's work cut out fer yer ef yer mean ter save Wild Pete."

"That's so," acquiesced Babe. "I'm ready fer anything thet kin be done, but you'll hev ter tell us, 'cause I don't know nothin' about this hyar place."

"Faix, thin, Oi do," put in Dan. "Didn't they make me wan uv the Death-in-Loife gang, an' didn't Oi go around in er white sheet an' er false face thet made me look loike ther ghost uv me second cousin's grandmother?"

"Ha! Thet's er good idea," said Sue, eagerly. "Dan, you kin do something ez will help us out."

"Phwat is it?" asked Dan, delighted at the prospect of being made use of by the young girl.

"Listen. The old woman has gone to bed. She sleeps in a room at the other end of the crib, near whar you came in thet day through the cave. You remember?"

"Faith, Oi do. Wull Oi iver forgit?"

"Wal, thar's er cl'ar field fer yer ter work in. You know whar they keep all them uniforms, es they call 'em."

"Meanin' the sheets an' false faces?"

"Yes."

"Indade Oi do."

"Go an' bring three uv 'em hyar."

"I will."

Dan disappeared through the doorway on the opposite side, which was fastened with a bolt on the side they were, and then Sue looked at Babe Vincent with a face aglow with determination and confidence.

"We'll git erway with 'em Babe, you'll see."

"I know it."

Dan returned in about a minute, and in another one the three were arrayed in the weird disguises of members of the Death-in-Life Band, and were laughing at each other beneath their ghastly masks.

"Both heeled?" asked Sue, her voice sounding hollow and muffled.

The two men each showed their revolvers in their hands, and then the girl led the way.

She passed through the doorway into the adjoining room, and opened what appeared to be a cupboard door. It was indeed a cupboard, with dishes and crockery on the shelves, all looking very innocent and matter-of-fact. But Sue knew better. She pulled the middle shelf toward her, and the false wall, shelves and all came out, revealing another heavy door behind, secured by two large bolts.

"This hyar place is the durnedest lay-out I ever see," muttered Babe to himself behind his mask. "It's full of traps an' secret doors. Nothin' could be better fer this sort of business."

When the heavy door was opened a small cell-like apartment was revealed by the light that struggled in from the room they had just left where the lamp was still burning.

Stretched on the floor was the form of a man, bound hand and foot.

"Thet's him," observed Sue, quietly.

"An' I only hope we are not too late."

Babe was stooping over him, and with a bowie-knife was cutting the rope that held him. He had just severed the last bond, enabling Wild Pete to rise to his feet, when there was a rustling in the other room.

"Quick!" whispered Sue. "The door!"

Babe pulled the door shut, and all four were in black darkness.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MARCIA READS THE WILL.

HARDLY was the door closed when they heard Bob Grant's voice calling Wintry Jim.

"He's found out thet I'm gone," whispered Sue, who had taken off her mask to enable her to breathe more freely, a precaution that Babe and Dan were not slow in taking, too, for the atmosphere was very close with the door shut and four people confined in such a small space.

"Ef he comes hyar, shoot!", she continued.

"I hev'n't er gun," said Wild Pete.

"Never mind. Ther other three uv us hez guns, an' you kin take this knife. I guess you kin do ez much with thet ez with er gun at close range."

Wild Pete took the bowie from the girl's hand, and stood ready for whatever might follow.

"Thar's only two uv 'em. Why shouldn't we go out an' take 'em now," he said. "I hev all ther evidence I want, an' I don't want ter take no chances on them gittin' away ag'in."

"Don't yer fool yerself on there only bein' two uv 'em. Thar's er big gang uv 'em, an' you'd hev 'em all down on yer at ther fu'st alarm. Don't fight less yer hev ter."

The girl spoke confidently, and Wild Pete believed with her, that discretion should go hand in hand with valor in this case.

In the mean time, Bob Grant was looking about the two rooms, and he once stood in front of the secret entrance to the cell in which the four friends were packed almost like sardines in a box.

"Thet feller's all right, at all events," he muttered. "Thar ain't nothin' disturbed him. But whar in thunder is ther gal? She ain't gone out, I'll swar, 'cause I've hed ther doors watched too close fer thet, an' she don't know nothin' about thet way through ther sitting-room, even ef she could open it from this side."

"Wal, what's ther trouble?" inquired a gruff voice at his side.

"Hello, Wintry. Thet you? Why, ther gal's got erway somehow, an' I can't make it out."

"You ought ter be able ter make it out. Thar ain't nothin' peculiar 'bout it. Marcia hed er little business ter settle with her, an' I guess she's taken her to her own boodore."

The ruffian laughed sardonically, and yawned.

"Praps you air right. I never thought uv thet."

"I wish yer hed thought uv it afore you called me up. Durned ef I wouldn't like ter pound my ear some time ter-night. I ain't hit er bunk fer er long time, it seems ter me," grumbled Wintry Jim.

"All right, go ter bed, an' I'll do ther same thing. As soon ez we git up we'd better fix this yer' durned coyote, Wild Pete. I don't mean ter let him stray ag'in."

With this significant remark, the two men walked through the room in which was the cell that held Wild Pete and his companions, and went toward the bedroom of Marcia, that Wintry Jim had ironically referred to as her "boodore."

Wild Pete made a restless movement, as if he would push open the door of the cell and get out, but Sue restrained him with a clutch on his arm.

"Hold on thar. Don't yer be in no hurry. This hyar's ez safe er place ez yer kin be in now, an' they will come back."

Hardly were the words out her mouth when the trampling of feet and the sound of Marcia's harsh voice warned them that the girl's prediction was already fulfilled.

"What d'yer say?" howled the hag. "Gone?"

"She ain't whar you say you left her," returned Bob Grant, who, with Wintry Jim, had accompanied Marcia back. "But she can't be gone. Whar kin she be gone ter? She must be around hyar somewhar."

The old woman gave utterance to an inarticulate curse in her rage, but the way she flourished the long, cruel knife in her hand indicated that if the girl had been unlucky enough to be in her power at that moment, there might have been a tragedy.

"Put away thet cussed knife, Marcia," commanded Bob Grant. "Yer don't want ter cut ther gal, do yer?"

"*Sacre!* If she gone, you pay for this, Bob Grant. I tell every one you not her uncle, an' that you steal from her the fortune that you mean to claim when she get to be nineteen years old. I tell—"

But here Bob Grant clapped one hand over the old woman's mouth, while with the other he gripped her throat so hard that her tongue lolled out and her beady eyes turned up.

Wintry Jim gave Bob Grant's arm a tug that made him loosen his hold a little.

"What air yer doin', Bob? You'll choke ther old gal."

"Cuss her! I will, ef she doesn't keep that mouth uv hers shut," returned Bob Grant, fiercely.

He flung the hag from him as he spoke, and she fell against the wall, panting but unsubdued.

"It's all right, Bob. There's no one to hear me here, but I tell you the girl is mine—mine, and I keep her till you pay me what you say for the money you are to give me when you get the fortune. Then, if you pay me, *she shall not trouble you any more!* That is all."

"Pshaw! I wuz er fool ter care," growled Bob to himself. "What does it matter what she says? I kin fix her an' ther gal, too, when I get the money. But she made me so mad thet I *could* hev choked her, an' I don't know but what it would be er good thing fer ther world of I did."

"Now, Bob Grant, I'm going to have the thing made straight while we talk about it. I don't trust you, and I don't want to be fooled if you go away. You see?" continued the old woman.

She took from her bosom an old brown leather pocketbook, that was fastened by a bright steel band and a small padlock. To the band was attached a steel chain, and the chain was attached to her body under her clothes in some way, probably around her waist.

Bob Grant looked covetously at it, but the old woman's knife was in her belt, close to her hand, and he knew that if he attempted to take it from her, he could only succeed by killing her.

"What is that?" he demanded.

"Wait, and I show you."

The old woman deliberately unfastened the padlock with a small key she produced from some of the secret recesses of her attire, and stepping to the table, spread upon it a worn paper, yellow with age, and of a decidedly legal aspect.

During this conversation, Sue had pushed open the door of the closet in which she and her companions were hiding, and all four were watching the proceedings in the adjoining room with eager eyes.

"P'raps we shall find out somethin' important now," whispered the girl. "Ther old woman is goin' ter give somethin' away, sure."

"Now, here is the will of William Grant—your father, Bob," said the old woman, composedly, looking at the ranchman. "He leaves his property to his granddaughter, Susan Grant, daughter of his eldest son, William Grant, all except \$10,000, that is to go to his second son, Bob Grant."

"Cuss him!" hissed Grant.

The old woman looked at him with a peculiar glitter in her beady black eyes, and went on reading from the yellow paper:

"His second son, Bob Grant, who will have enough money then to buy whisky to drown himself in."

"Wal? Thet isn't all," growled Grant.

"No, but it is enough. You thought I burned the will when you gave it to me. *Sacre!* I know too much. I let you keep the money and property, but I was always ready to prove that this girl was the real

owner. Now, if you do not give me the twenty five thousand dollars you promised, I tell all, and you go to prison for making the false money, and the girl get all the property and the great heaps of good money you think is all yours."

"You wretch!" howled Grant. "Whar did you get thet will? You allers said yer hed it, but I didn't b'lieve yer. But you prevented me taking possession of the property, and hyar I've been workin' at this hyar business of making 'queer' money jist on your account."

He made a spring at the old woman, but just as he reached her a strong hand seized him and hurled him backward, as the voice of Wild Pete yelled:

"Bob Grant, you air my prisoner!"

The ranchman burst into a mocking laugh, and, drawing his pistol, he would have shot the detective through the head, but that some one else interposed—no less a person than Wintry Jim.

"Hold on thar, boss. Give ther foller er fair show. He can't hurt yer here, an' you don't need ter shoot him down onless he shows fight himself."

Wintry Jim had seized Bob Grant around the waist as he spoke, and he was as excited as he ever got, which was not saying much, for he was always cool.

Wild Pete had heard in the old woman's revelation and reading of the will an explanation of something he had been trying to understand, and when the conversation reached the point of Bob Grant flying at the old woman, he could not restrain himself.

He had leaped out so suddenly that his companions had not divined his intention until he was fairly upon the rancher.

Now, however, all three came out at once.

With a yell of baffled rage, Bob Grant tore himself out of the grasp of Wintry Jim, and firing one ineffectual shot, more to ease his mind than with the hope of hitting any one, he dashed through the doorway to the rear of the cave, and made for the outside, with Wild Pete in hot pursuit.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DAN AND BABE IN A TIGHT PLACE.

The disappearance of Wild Pete and Bob Grant seemed to bring the others to their senses.

Dan McPhelan rushed upon the old woman, and, with one dexterous twist, threw her to the floor and wrenched from her hand the long knife that she was waving in a threatening manner, and that she would undoubtedly have plunged into the young Irishman had he not taken it from her.

The precious will had fallen upon the floor, and Sue, with her eyes averted from those of Marcia, picked it up and put it in her bosom. Then, without looking in the direction of Marcia, she followed Bob Grant and Wild Pete.

"Ef she'd ever caught my eye, I should hev been gone," whispered the girl to herself, breathlessly, as she reached the outer air, and looked around for Wild Pete and Bob Grant.

"Phwell, thot don't seem very koind, for the girl to go off that way," thought Dan, as he tried to shake the old woman into submission. "But p'raps she knows better than Oi do, what's best."

With this philosophical reflection, he dragged Marcia to the cell from which Wild Pete had just been rescued, and with the cord that had bound him soon made her secure. Then he thrust her into the cell and fastened the double doors.

"Thot makes her comfortable for awhile," he muttered, as he returned to the other room, in which he had last seen Wintry Jim and Babe Vincent standing quietly looking at each other, as if trying to make up their minds as to the best way to commence an attack.

"Howly Moses!" he exclaimed. "The shpalpeen has got away wid him sure. He's kilt, Oi do belave."

Babe Vincent was lying in a heap in a corner, and Wintry Jim was not to be seen.

"Whar is he?" came from Babe, in a rather weak voice, as he picked himself up. "He gave me ar kick in ther stomach that doubled me up, an' then he lit out. The one-eyed feller is er terror, I tell yer. He hed me on ther floor an' got out afore I had time ter do anything."

Babe said this with a most rueful expression of countenance, and it was plain that he felt the disgrace of being beaten in such a way keenly.

"Phwere is he?"

"Gone! Thet's all I know."

"Phwell, it don't matter much. They ain't loikely to be gone far now, for they must all be ready for some shape. Be the powers, Oi'm so toired Oi don't know phwere Oi am," returned the Irishman.

"Thet's so," observed Babe, thoughtfully. "I shouldn't wonder ef Wild Pete wuz ter git fooled on them fellers ter-night jist by them goin' away somewhar ter git er sleep. Let us go out an' see, anyhow."

"An' I've the ould woman phwere she is?"

"Why not? She would have left ther captain thar all night."

"So she w'u'd. Let her stay there, the ould cat."

The two men found their way to the cave-exit, Dan McPhelan being pretty familiar with it as the result of his being sworn in as one of the Death-in-Life Band, and soon they were out in the cool morning air, where everything was quiet, in sharp contrast with the turbulence of the scenes they had just participated in.

The two men went around to the front of the house, and keeping well in the shadow of the cottonwoods, crept upon the veranda, and so into the sitting-room.

They had hardly reached the room, and were just about to walk across to investigate the mantel and its secret springs, when both were suddenly seized by a powerful hand, and, before they could defend themselves, were flat on the floor, being held there by a resistless weight, as if each had a knee on his chest.

Babe and Dan McPhelan squirmed and kicked, but to no purpose. The man holding them down was too strong for them.

"Let go!" gasped Babe.

The response was the stuffing of a handkerchief into his mouth, so that he could hardly breathe, much less speak.

"Owl! Ye shpalpeen!" burst in a feeble gurgle from Dan, but it was so feeble that the words were indistinguishable, and then the whole body of the mysterious assailant fell upon him, so that he felt as if he were suffocating.

For a few seconds the three remained in this position. Neither Dan or Babe could reach their weapons, and for all that appeared they would never have an opportunity of using them again.

Babe was cursing inwardly that Grant and Wintry Jim had overcome him again, and if he could have reached his revolver, he would have banged away at the burly form of the man who he felt certain was Bob Grant, even if it had brought the whole of the Death and Life gang about his ears.

The captor was evidently getting his breath and working up his strength to make sure of his prisoners, for he lay quite still for the few seconds until he made his next move.

This was what neither Babe or Dan McPhelan hardly expected.

Without rising, he wriggled about as if feeling in his pocket for something he wanted, and then Babe felt something cold on one of his wrists, and before he realized it a handcuff was snapped upon it, and his other hand being drawn forward, was confined in the other circle of steel, and he was pinioned in a secure manner that precluded the possibility of his escaping until the handcuffs were unlocked.

He felt his revolver drawn out of its scabbard, and then the weight of his foe's body was partly taken from him.

To slip another pair of handcuffs upon the wrists of Dan did not take a moment, and he, too, was disarmed, and left lying on the floor, helpless.

This was not all, however. The stranger produced a pair of leg-irons from somewhere, and placing one on a leg of each of his prisoners, fastened them together, so that they could not move except together.

"Thar! I don't think you'll git far erway now," growled the stranger, under his breath, as he arose.

The two prisoners heard the fellow go to the door that led to the interior of the house, and walk quietly away through the passage.

Hardly had he done so, when there was a slight noise again, and from the veranda entered some one with a quick, light step that Dan McPhelan recognized as that of Sue.

"Howly Moses! Phwat's all this m'ane?" he thought.

The girl groped her way across the room toward the back door, unconscious of the presence of the two men on the floor, neither of whom thought it well to speak, in case they should startle her and cause her to make an outcry that might mean danger for her until they knew the purpose of Bob Grant, who had no doubt gone after some of the gang to remove them to a place of safety. It was not likely that he would leave them lying on the floor of the parlor, where they would be found by some of the men as soon as they got up for their daily labor which commences early on cattle ranges.

Sue was thoroughly familiar with the place, and she walked swiftly across the room and into the passage without hesitation.

Dan McPhelan could not keep his tongue quiet any longer than the moment when he felt sure she was out of hearing.

"Phwat's goin' ter be the ind uv this?" he asked, of his companion.

Babe had torn the handkerchief from his mouth, and he whispered:

"I don't know. But I think ther captain will be on ther watch fer us. I don't think Bob Grant will dare ter murder us, although he hez found out now that we air both with ther captain.

"Praps he might tek a notion to kill us in spite uv that," was Dan's lugubrious response.

"Praps."

"Indade, ye are a Job's comforter. Be me sowl, ye are."

"Wal, we air both roped in by ther same hand," said Babe, in a matter-of-fact tone.

This whispered colloquy was suddenly interrupted by the sound of footsteps in the room, and then a smothered cry from Sue.

Dan McPhelan tried to start up, but he was too firmly secured, and the only effect of his movement was to make a slight chinking of the handcuffs and leg-irons, and cause Babe pain by the leg-iron cutting his ankle. Dan fell back, and there was the sound of some one being dragged across the floor, while a voice that they recognized at once as that of Sam Sharkey, hissed.

"Keep quiet, or I'll choke yer."

"Ow, the murtherin' villain!" cried Dan.

Sam Sharkey tried to pierce the gloom, but could see nothing.

"Keep quiet, I tell yer," he repeated, as he dragged the girl out of the room to the veranda.

"Babe, let's git up," shouted Dan. "Faith! We must save her, so we must!"

In his excitement, he tried again to rise, and this time, by Babe making a similar movement, they were both on their feet.

"Aisy does it! Gintly, Babe!"

By carefully moving the feet that were fastened, so that they went in the same direction at the same moment, the two men were able to hobble to the door and thence to the veranda.

They reached there just in time to distinguish a moving shadow at the entrance to the canyon where the spring bubbled and dashed over the rocks as merrily as if there were no deeds of violence in its vicinity.

"Come on, Babe. Let's go afther thim," cried Dan.

He took an ill-advised step forward, and both rolled down the veranda steps in a confused heap.

Hardly had they reached the bottom when they were aware of the presence of two men, who were strolling around the corner of the house, and who not knowing that Babe and Dan were curled up within a foot of them, walked to the veranda, and sitting on the steps, began to talk.

As their conversation was of a very interesting character, we will save it for another chapter.

CHAPTER XXIX.

WHO GOT THE DROP?

"So yer mean ter wipe him out, eh?" asked a voice that both the listeners recognized as that of Wintry Jim.

The person that replied was Bob Grant, as they knew so soon as he spoke. He growled, fiercely.

"Yes. Why not? I only wanted ter git him back hyar, an' I knew ez he'd foller us. It wouldn't hev been safe in Evanston, even though I do mean ter git out uv this part uv ther country. We kin wipe him out hyar, an' no one will know nothin' 'bout it."

"Hedn't yer better find him, fu'st?" suggested Wintry Jim.

A hoarse chuckle was the response.

"You think he's somewhar about ther ranch, then?" continued Wintry Jim.

"I'm sure uv it."

"What about ther gal an' ther old woman? You know I stand in on thet money when you git it?"

"I know. Wal, as ter ther gal, we'll see what we'll do when we git thet cussed Wild Pete out uv ther way. Ez fer Babe an' thet durned Irishman, I don't know what ter say about them."

"This hyar is gittin' interestin'," whispered Babe, while Dan McPhelan strained his ears to hear the next remark.

"Better let them git dropped from behind er rock or somethin'," suggested Wintry Jim.

"Oh, yes. We'll find some way uv disposin' uv them when we git rid of Wild Pete," returned Bob Grant, carelessly.

"Phwat a murtherin' divil he is," thought Dan.

"Whar is this Wild Pete now, do yer think?" asked Wintry Jim.

"Wal, when I lit out uv ther place below thar, I let him run past me, an' he come in ther direction uv ther house. I guess he's in hyar somewhar er lookin' fer me."

"Think so?"

"Yes, he hed ther drop on me down thar, an' I didn't propose ter be caught at my own game, or I'd hev finished him when he wuz in my hands. But them fother two fellers came from somewhar, and I felt ez we hed stirred up er nest uv tarantulas afore we knowed it."

"It did seem like it. Thet feller Babe tried ter fight it out with me, so I just slung him on ther floor and left him. I went down thar afterward, an' he'd got out, too."

"Wal we hev them all hyar now, and ther best thing is ter bring this thing ter an end right away."

"Is any uv ther gang inside?" asked Wintry Jim.

"No. Thet's ther wu'st uv it. Yer know, I told 'em all ter be in Evanston, an' I guess they're loafin' around thar yet. I didn't bargain fer hevin' ter git out quite so soon, but this move on ther part uv Wild Pete sort er bu'sted my plans."

"Wal, let's git ter business. We only hev about another hour afore all them fellers will be up, and then we hev ter be quiet 'cow-punchers ag'in, yer know."

The two men laughed quietly, at the idea of the comparatively peaceful pursuit that hid their real business in the ranch, and then they stepped cautiously into the parlor.

Hardly had they done so, when they heard footsteps in the passage.

"Look out, Wintry. Hyar's some one er moving," warned Bob Grant, as he pulled his companion swiftly into a corner of the room.

The stranger, whoever he was, stopped as soon as he entered the parlor and tried to see how things looked in the dark parlor.

As soon as Bob Grant and Wintry Jim had strolled leisurely up the veranda steps Dan and Babe had struggled to their feet, and crawled after them.

"If we only hed a gun," sighed Babe.

"Oi wish Oi hod the bit of a shillelagh thot Oi used to use in the ould country. Oi'd crack the skooll uv 'em, if Oi didn't do anything else," added Dan McPhelan.

"Drop down," whispered Babe.

The two men, hampered as they were, dropped to the floor and managed to crawl inside without being noticed by any one of the other three men in the room.

They had reached the middle of the parlor, and then Babe could hardly repress a cry of joy, as his manacled hands fell upon the two pistols that the stranger had taken from them when he had made them prisoners.

He took one pistol and passed it to Dan, who comprehended the situation in a moment, and found it even harder than Babe to restrain an audible expression of delight.

The two friends, although hampered by the handcuffs, could fire their guns if needs were, and they felt proportionately delighted.

Meanwhile the stranger had walked cautiously into the parlor and was feeling with his feet for the men he had captured.

"Ugh!" grunted Babe, as the stranger's heavy foot came down on the small of his back.

There was a smothered laugh from the owner of the foot as he gave Babe a playful kick.

"You're thar, air yer? Wal, I thought yer wouldn't go very far away, when I'd put my pretty bracelets on yer," he observed cheerfully. "Wal, git up."

Neither Babe nor Dan McPhelan answered. They were too much astonished to say a word.

The big stranger who had locked them together with bands of steel was Wild Pete!

"Come on hyar! Git up!" repeated Wild Pete. "I've fooled with yer lng enough."

Babe and Dan struggled to their feet, and then each felt the cold muzzle of a pistol touching their foreheads. Dan shuddered involuntarily, and Babe had all he could do to prevent his making some outward sign of trepidation.

"Yes, it don't feel very nice, does it?" chuckled Wild Pete. "Wal, yer see, Mr. Robert Grant, ef er man goes ag'in' the law he must expect ter feel er gun-barrel ag'in' his countenance. Thet's all erbout it, don't yer see?"

Babe and Dan began to see that there was a mistake all around.

"Say," said Babe, as he was about to try and say something that would put Wild Pete on his guard.

"Shet up!" commanded Wild Pete, fiercely, as he moved his pistol slightly on Babe's brow.

"Durn his picter! He'll shoot afore I kin speak," thought Babe. "What in thunderation shall I do?"

"Walk to the door," ordered Wild Pete, "an' don't try any monkey business, or you are both dead men. I hev er wagon outside, an' I don't mean ter trust yer out uv it till I hev yer in Evanston jail."

"Moses!" whispered Dan.

"What's thet?" and the pistol was pressed so hard on the Irishman's forehead that a little ring would have been visible on it had there been light enough to see it.

It was difficult for the two men to move, hobbled as they were, but they knew that any hesitation would mean their death. They realized that wild Pete would not take any chances on Bob Grant and Wintry Jim, although actually he was taking the most deadly of chances unawares.

If they could only warn him.

Wild Pete marched them out to the veranda, his pistols never leaving their foreheads, although he was obliged to march backward to keep them covered in this way.

And now Babe Vincent realized that there was another danger. Although he could not see, he was sure that Bob Grant and Wintry Jim were following them out, and that they would make an attack upon Wild Pete before he could reach the wagon.

Babe could hear the breathing of the rancher. He knew it was he because there was a peculiar snort to which Grant was addicted now and then, especially when excited. It was not loud, but it was distinct. Bob Grant and Wintry Jim were on the trail.

Down the steps went the three men, and a few steps behind were Bob Grant and Wintry Jim.

Suddenly Wild Pete withdrew his pistols from the foreheads of his two prisoners, and dropped behind, whispering in their ears.

"I see yer hev pistols in yer hands. Wal, you kin keep them thar, 'cause I don't mean ter let yer use 'em, an' I kin take them away when I git ter ther wagon. But ef you try ter raise yer hands only an inch, I'll riddle both on yer so thet yer kin sell yerselves fer collenders. Savy?"

Then he marched them on again.

The wagon—one of the regular prairie schooners, with a canvas top and strong

wheels—was drawn up near the horse corral, and the team was already in the shafts.

They could not distinguish it till they were right upon it, but Wild Pete knew his way, and went toward it direct.

Bob Grant and Wintry Jim were not far behind, following him in complete silence.

When the three men reached the wagon, and Wild Pete prepared to help his prisoners in, Wintry whispered:

"Bob?"

"Wal?"

"Why not do it now?"

"What?"

"Shoot?"

"Rather do it quieter. What's ther use of blazin' away with guns ef we kin do it without any noise? I don't want any one ter know thet we are mixed up in it."

"Bob, you ain't ez smart sometimes ez ye are at others."

"Ain't I?" sneered Bob. "Wal, will yer explain?"

"Yes. Suppose yer do hev ter shoot down this hyar feller, Wild Pete! Ain't he around ther corral in ther middle uv ther night, and ain't there been lots uv horses run off in Wyoming this season?"

"Wal?"

"How kin you see who you air er shootin' in ther dark, an' ain't it reasonable tersuppose thet this hyar Wild Pete is tryin' ter make er stampede? And ain't yer er perfect right ter kill er rustler wharever yer meet him?"

Bob Grant did not answer for a moment. He was somewhat impressed with his companion's reasoning.

"Thet's right so fur ez it goes," he returned. "But ef I kin do it without any fuss, so thet no one will know who is ter blame, it may save er heap uv trouble."

"Hev yer own way," said Wintry Jim, indifferently.

"I mean ter."

"Go ahead, then, but don't say I didn't advise yer right."

"I won't blame you, Wintry."

"Wal, what d'yer mean ter do now? I s'pose yer hev some plan?"

"Yes. Crawl up ter ther wagon, and then just ez he is gittin' them two fellers in, grab him behind, take erway his weapons, and stick er bowie into his heart."

Bob Grant hissed this in a fierce whisper that told how thoroughly in earnest he was.

Wintry Jim heard him with a cold smile on his lips.

"Wal, Bob, I don't like thet way uv killin' er man, but I s'pose it will hev ter go this time."

"I s'pose it will," returned Bob Grant, significantly, as he went forward to put his plan into execution.

Wild Pete was shoving Babe and Dan into the wagon together, warning them that any suspicious movement on their part would mean instant death to them.

The stars gave enough light for him to see whether they tried to use their pistols, and it was a fancy with him to let them retain the weapons. Most men have some little weakness in vanity, and it was Wild Pete's not to be afraid of Bob Grant and his gang, whether they had guns in their hands or not.

Babe and Dan were inside the wagon, at the front, where they were not hidden by the canvas top, and Wild Pete had just stepped upon the front wheel, when there was a shout behind him, and a pair of arms encircled his neck with an iron grip.

Wild Pete half turned and discharged his pistol, but held as he was, the shot passed over the head of his assailant.

The flash gave him enough light, however, to see that the man who was holding him was no other than Bob Grant.

"Why, who ther deuce air you?" he stammered, dragging himself partly away from his assailant, toward his two prisoners.

"Dan McPhelan, be the powers!" yelled the Irishman, as he and Babe each covered the two rascals with their revolvers.

"Cusses! I didn't know they were heeled, howled Bob Grant, as he involuntarily let go of the detective, and threw up his hands.

"Ah, but yer see, yer wuz mistook fer once," laughed Babe, adding: "Lift yer hands higher, you Wintry Jim, or I'll blow ther knuckles off yer!"

"If yer'd follered my advice, this hyar

wouldn't hev happened," growled Wintry Jim to the rancher, as he obeyed Babe Vincent's command.

CHAPTER XXX.

A DISTANT SHOT.

"CAPTAIN, you put these yer iron things on Dan an' me. Now p'raps yer kin take them off!" suggested Babe Vincent, as he still stood off Wintry Jim with his pistol held in both hands.

Wild Pete had not yet got over his astonishment, and had been standing, with one foot on the wheel of the wagon, looking into the faces of his two friends alternately, as well as he could in the dark.

"What er cussed fool I am!" was all he could say.

"Oh, no, you're not, captain. Ther best uv us gits left sometimes, yer know," observed Babe, encouragingly.

"Yis, if yez don't belave it, ask Mr. Grant," put in Dan McPhelan, with a guffaw that shook the wagon.

The ranchman made a slight movement of rage, but Dan waved his pistol up and down warningly, as he observed:

"Kape still, now, or Oi'll put dayloight t'rough yez, so Oi wull."

Wild Pete climbed into the wagon, and laid his two pistols on the seat, so that he could back up his companions if need should arise. Then he felt in his pockets for the key of the handcuffs, and in less than a minute had freed both the men who had suffered only because he had not recognized them.

"Boys, will yer ever forgive me?" he asked, as he threw the irons, clanking and jangling, on the seat, and scratched his head viciously.

"Fergive yer, Cap? Wal, thet's er good one. I might hev knowed it was you, seein' yer without er hat. You lost yours down thar by ther B'ar River last night, an' I see yer hev'n't got another one since."

It was true. Wild Pete had been moving about without any other head covering than his long hair, which was dropping over his shoulders in the picturesque way it always did when not held back by a hat.

"Thar's one in ther wagon hyar," he remarked, carelessly. "I'll find it an' put it on, just fer ther style uv ther thing, though I don't know ez I would need er hat very much."

He had collected his thoughts by this time, and gathering up the handcuffs in a business-like way, he jumped out of the wagon, and stepped around to the back of Wintry Jim.

"Keep yer guns pointed straight, boys," he said.

"We will," answered Babe Vincent and Dan McPhelan together.

With a sudden and dexterous movement, Wild Pete jerked the two hands of Wintry Jim downward and backward, and snapped the handcuffs on his wrists.

"Sorry ter hev ter fasten yer hands behind yer, Wintry, but I don't think ez yer would be safe any other way."

"Here, thin! Don't luk ahint yer, me darlint, or Oi'll hev ter shoot you full uv holes," howled Dan to Bob Grant. "It's not yure business phwat the captain is doin'. He'll git to you in time, let it be known to yez."

Bob Grant had involuntarily turned his head slightly, but the warning of Dan, backed up, as it was, with a threatening motion of the heavy six-shooter, brought his head back to "eyes front" in a hurry.

As Dan had said, his turn soon came, and he found himself with his hands fastened securely behind him almost before he realized that Wild Pete had reached him.

The detective took the pistols away from his captives, with the remark:

"I let you hev your guns, boys, but it seems ez if I must hev known thar wuz something wrong, or I'd never hev done it."

"It wuzn't so much wrong, either, Cap," returned Babe. "Ef you'd took 'em away, we couldn't hev helped yer quite so handy when these hyar fellers hed yer in ther squeeze, could we?"

They did not spend any more time in talking.

It was very near the time when the daily life of the ranch would commence, and it was not the detective's policy to let the cowboys about the place know what business he had on hand. He did not know which of

them belonged to the Death-in-Life Band, and he had no mind to be beaten out of his game now that he had it in his clutches, with all the evidence he required to convict.

He hustled Bob Grant and Wintry Jim into the wagon, and then, with a careless whistle that told how much pleased he was, produced a lariat, and tied their hands to an iron staple in the floor of the wagon, so that they sat back to back, and could not stir. Then he brought forth two sets of leg-irons, and shackled them so that they were still more helpless.

"Don't like ter hev ter do all this, yer know," said the detective, "but it's er compliment ter your slipperiness. Savy?"

Bob Grant grunted a curse, but Wintry Jim took the situation with the philosophical coolness of a true gambler. He was watching for a chance to escape, but it was not his way to indulge in idle regrets.

Having disposed his prisoners in the wagon to his satisfaction, the detective moved to the heads of the teams and led them away in the direction of the gulch where the secret entrance to the lower regions of the house was situated.

"What's he goin' ter do now?" whispered Bob Grant.

"I dunno. Let's wait an' see," was Wintry Jim's reply.

Arrived at the rocks that hid the entrance, Wild Pete left the horses' heads and disappeared.

"Whar's he goin', I wonder?"

It was Babe Vincent that spoke, and his question was in effect the same as that of Wintry Jim.

"Lookin' for Sue, maybe," said Dan. "Ah, faith, Oi wush he hod any chance uv foindin' her, so Oi do. Thot ugly shnake uv a Sam Sharkey has her."

"Thet's so. But ain't you man enough ter git her erway from him?" asked Babe.

Dan McPhelan waved his revolver in the air as he answered: "Be jabbers, Oi am, an' what's more, Oi'll lick thot Sam Sharkey wid me fists if Oi'm kilt for it afterward, so Oi wull."

What more Dan might have said was cut short by the reappearance of the detective, dragging with him what appeared to be a large bag with two or three struggling cats inside.

This idea was carried by the sounds of hissing and inarticulate sounds very much like several healthy Toms in a fearful rage.

"Begorra! It's the ould woman! Phwell, phwell, now we wull hov a pleasant journey, wid wan uv the fair sex wid us. Och, but she's the darlint, so she is."

Babe could not help laughing at this outburst of Dan's, but the old woman, who was near enough to hear the Irishman's words, gave vent to a "*Sacre!*" that made Dan fairly jump.

"Oh, but you are the daisy!" he added.

"Never mind about paying compliments to the lady," said Wild Pete, laughing. "Just help me git her aboard ther wagon. Thet's ther principal thing at this stage uv ther game."

Babe Vincent was covering the two desperadoes in the wagon, and he did not deem it wise to withdraw his pistol, even although they were so tightly bound. But Dan leaped from the wagon, and taking one arm of Marcia, helped her into the vehicle.

It was perhaps a good thing for the young Irishman that the detective had taken the precaution to handcuff the hag. Otherwise, she would most certainly have left the imprint of her ten nails on his countenance.

"Now, boys, just hold her on the seat between yer fer er spell, an' we'll git out uv hyar," said Wild Pete.

He brought forward three horses, all saddled and equipped, that he had had ready at the corral, but that his companions had not noticed before.

Two of the horses—wiry bronchos of the usual type—he fastened to the back of the wagon, but the third—a big, black horse that the occupants of the wagon recognized as Diablo, he bestrode, and rode near the heads of the team in the wagon.

"Now, Babe, take ther lines in yer hands an' drive this hyar team fer all thet's in it fer er mile or two. When once we git out uv sight uv ther house, I don't so much keer."

Babe did as directed, and, with the team-

ster's long whip, gave the horses a cut that started them off at a rough gallop. Wild Pete, on his black stallion, encouraging them to renewed efforts.

They drove around to the ravine that was the most direct road to Evanston, and which has been described more than once already.

The road was rough in places, and there the team had to pull with all its strength, but in others the path was as smooth as a city paved street, and then good time was made.

At one time an up grade was reached, with lots of loose bowlders to make the road worse, and there Wild Pete fastened the end of his lariat to the shafts of the wagon, and with a tremendous exertion on the part of Diablo, pulled the wagon over a spot that it could hardly have passed with the aid of the team alone.

For some time they struggled on thus, and then, reaching a portion of the journey where they knew it would be fairly smooth, the detective gave the word to stop so that he could arrange things for the trip across the plain.

It would take them several hours to reach Evanston, and it was desirable that the party should get some sleep.

The two men with the handcuffed hands behind their backs had apparently dropped into a doze, but the detective did not trust them very much. He would like to have released them, so that they could lie flat in the wagon, for humanity's sake, but he knew the characters with whom he had to deal, and he was fully conscious that such a course would be unsafe.

"Tired, Marcia?" asked Wild Pete.

"No," was the surly answer.

"Wal, yer'll hev ter lie down an' sleep."

The detective was not in awe of the old woman, and he talked to her in a decided tone that told her at once she had to do as she was told. A sign to Babe, and the young man took the hag by the arm and led her into the body of the wagon, but so far away from the two desperadoes that there would be no fear of her trying to play any tricks in collusion with them. Although the old woman was handcuffed, and Bob Grant and Wintry Jim were so firmly secured that there could be but little fear of their causing trouble, the detective did not mean to take the slightest chances. He had had too much trouble to work up the case and to catch the rascals, to let them have any opportunity to get away from him now, if he could help it.

He had soon perfected his arrangements.

Babe Vincent was to lie down between the old woman and the two other prisoners, and Dan McPhelan was to stretch himself upon the seat, and they were all to enjoy a nap, while while Wild Pete would ride by the side of the wagon on Diablo, and keep his eyes on the prisoners.

All were tired, having been for many hours without sleep, and soon a chorus of snores came from the wagon that satisfied Wild Pete all were oblivious to their surroundings.

It was nearly daylight now, and the detective looked longingly over the plain in the direction of Evanston, wishing the journey was at an end.

"I guess we are both tired, Diablo," he murmured, as he patted the beautiful sleek neck of the black stallion. "It seems almost brutal of me to make you take this trip again after the work you have had. But you don't mind, do you, old fellow?"

Wild Pete had dropped his Western vernacular, as he did sometimes, although not often, when alone, and there was a great deal of tenderness in his tones to the horse that he had learned to love as men do who believe that horses are very little lower in the worldly scale than human beings.

Diablo whinnied in response to his master's words. If he could not understand their exact purport, he knew that they meant kindness, and all the savage nature of the horse seemed to be taken out of him when Wild Pete spoke.

Wild Pete yawned as he rode on, ever and anon casting a glance into the interior of the wagon, where everything was peaceful and quiet.

The sun was just showing its red rim above the distant horizon, and cast a wawn

glow over the slow-moving wagon, with its team keeping their heads down, but pulling with a steadiness that told how conscientiously they were doing their work.

Wild Pete, with his long, flowing hair and his clear-cut features, sitting erect upon his beautiful horse, made a picturesque figure, and the whole scene was one that a painter would have loved to transfer to his canvas with a few bold strokes.

As they covered mile after mile, Wild Pete's head drooped a little, and soon his chin dropped upon his breast in a half doze, from which, however, he aroused himself every minute or two, to look into the wagon, and see that everything was right. He was too much a man of the plains to go to sleep altogether while on duty.

He was enjoying the half-dozing condition to the utmost, however, when, suddenly, the sound of a distant pistol-shot broke upon his ear, and he was broad awake, with his revolver in his hand, almost before the echo had had time to follow the original sound.

His keen eye scanned the whole plain, but for a moment he could not distinguish any cause for the noise he had heard.

Then an exclamation broke from him:

"Sharkey and the gal, Sue, sure ez shootin'!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN JAIL AT LAST.

He leaned over and shook Babe Vincent and Dan McPhelan so heartily that they were awake in an instant.

"Look out, boys," he whispered. "Thar's Sue and Sharkey down near the river, an' there's trouble fer ther gal."

The two men jumped up in the wagon and looked in the direction pointed by wild Bill.

"Whar?" asked Babe Vincent.

"They're out uv sight now, but I could just see them a minute ago, an' I saw ther puff of smoke ez ther gal fired a gun at ther dirty coyote she is with. I tell yer, boys, I've got ter git thet gal erway from him, fer thar may be trouble fer her ef I don't."

Wild Pete spoke hurriedly and in an agitated tone that was not common with him, and Dan McPhelan, at least, was pleased to note the interest the detective took in the young girl whom the Irishman considered the very queen of women.

"What do yer suppose wuz goin' on?" asked Babe.

"Wal, I'll tell yer," answered Wild Pete. "Thar's no manner uv doubt thet thet thar dirty skunk wuz watching fer er chance ter git hold uv ther gal ag'in around ther ranch, an' thet he did git his hooks on her while we wuz foolin' around thar looking after Bob Grant."

"Wal?"

"Wal, it's plain ernough. He hed two horses thar ready. Then he caught her un-awares, clapped her on one horse, set himself on ther other, and rode erway with her."

"But phwy didn't she ride the other way? Faith, she ain't ther koind uv gurl to go wid any mon ez she didn't want, if Oi know onything about her," observed Dan.

"It would be easy enough to tie her in ther saddle, an' I've no doubt thet is what Sam Sharkey done. He's er cunning duck."

"You're right, Babe. Thet's just about ther way it wuz," acquiesced the detective.

"Howsumever, they've got erway from us now, an' ther only thing ez we kin do is ter git these hyar people into Evanston jail ez soon ez we kin, an' then make er hunt fer Sam Sharkey. I would bet a hundred dollars ez he will be hidin' around thar somewhar."

The two prisoners and Marcia had not woke up during this discussion, so far as could be seen, but there was a suspicious quivering of the eyelids of Bob Grant that would have made a close observer fancy he had heard most of the conversation, and was drawing his own conclusions from it.

There were rocky hills in the neighborhood of Bear River, as has already been explained, and Sam Sharkey knew his way among them so well that it was easy for him to get out of sight of Wild Pete and his party when he saw them coming over the plain, as doubtless he did.

"Wal, boys, let's travel," added Wild

Pete, after a minute's pause, during which it was evident that he was thinking deeply. "We hev hed er long chase, but it's drawing ter er close now, or I'm 'way off in my calkulations."

Dan and Babe lay down in the wagon for a moment, and then both got up as if struck by a simultaneous impulse.

"Captain," said Babe, "we fellers hev hed some sleep, an' I don't propose ter go any further unless you come inter ther wagon an' let us keep watch. You kin git an hour's sleep afore we reach Evanston, easily."

The detective hesitated an instant, and then, feeling that he really needed rest to enable him to do his part in what was to follow, he jumped from the back of Diablo and hitched him to the back of the wagon.

"Babe, I don't mind ef I do pound my ear fer an hour, fer I am erbout tuckered out. But call me ef anything turns up. We might come across thet coyote, Sharkey, afore we git ter town, an' remember, when we do, I hev ter deal with him."

"Faix, Oi'd loike to hov a bond in thot," observed Dan, with an expression that did not argue a pleasant time for Sharkey when they should meet.

"You shall hev your share of the fun, Dan, don't fear," returned Wild Pete, as he curled himself up in the bottom of the wagon and dropped asleep almost immediately.

"The captain's a broth uv a b'ye, now, let it be known to yez," observed Dan, admiringly, as he took the lines in his hand and set the team in motion.

The town of Evanston was just awakening into life as the wagon rumbled along the principal street and stopped in front of the jail to which the reader has been introduced in a previous chapter.

From all that could be seen, the man with the sack coat and broad brimmed hat behind the desk and brass railing might never have moved since the last time he was seen there by Wild Pete. He had a cigar in his mouth, and was the picture of calm content, as he glanced up from beneath his heavy eyebrows to see what all the fuss in the street was about.

Wild Pete strode into the office and smiled.

"Wal, Sol?" was his greeting.

"Wal, yerself, captain," was the imperturbable reply of the official, without removing the big cigar from his lips.

"I've got 'em."

"Who?"

"Bob Grant and Wintry Jim."

"So?"

There was a broad smile gradually lifting the heavy mustache and eyebrows, that proved how pleased the official was at the news, although he did not say much.

"Yes! I've hed trouble, but I knew I'd land 'em."

"I knew yer would," agreed Sol.

"Is ther cells ready?"

"You bet."

"Any one in?"

"No. Empty house."

"All ther better. These hyar air ticklish customers, an' I'd ruther they hed ther place ter themselves."

"Thet wouldn't make no difference," observed Sol, apparently a little nettled. "So long ez I'm sheriff uv Uintah county, I don't think thar's any sich thing ez jail-breakin' in these hyar parts."

Wild Pete saw that the sheriff's professional pride was touched, so he hastened to remark:

"Oh, no, Sol, I know thet; but still it is ez well ter keep sich pris'ners ez these by themselves. Don't you think so, as sheriff of ther county?"

This deference to his opinion mollified Sol, and he graciously agreed to Wild Pete's proposition, only remarking as he laboriously arose from his easy-chair, still puffing at his huge cigar, and strolled out to the street to see the prisoners:

"We'll do ther best we kin with 'em."

Marcia was taken out first, and she bestowed a scowl upon her captors that made the sheriff pull a little harder on his big cigar, as he foresaw some little chance of trying his will power against that of the fair prisoner.

However, he did not make any remark, but simply seized the hag with a profes-

sional clutch on the arm just above the elbow that she could no more have shaken off than she could break the steel handcuffs that clasped her wrists.

Sol led her into the office, and then, with a huge key that he carried in a side pocket, opened a massive iron door that was concealed behind an innocent wooden door such as might be seen in any ordinary office. This iron door had a square opening, about six inches each way, guarded by an iron bar across the middle. It afforded a full view of the prison portion of the structure beyond.

It was a room about twelve feet square, on each side of which were two barred doors, appertaining to cells of the customary jail dimensions, eight feet long by five feet wide, fitted with a couch and a table, on which were a tin cup and plate.

Sol brought forth another key attached to a chain around his waist, and, having ushered the old woman into the main apartment, he unlocked the door of the nearest cell and let her in.

As he locked the door Marcia growled:

"The handcuffs! You leave them on?"

"Yes, for a little while," answered the sheriff, as he went out for the other two prisoners, after carefully locking the doors behind him, and taking a parting look into the prison to see that all was right before leaving.

It was not so easy a task to get Wintry Jim and Bob Grant into the jail, because they were fastened together in such a way. But Sol, Wild Pete and Babe carried them in bodily, while Dan McPhelan kept watch behind, revolver in hand, ready to punish any dangerous move on the part of the prisoners, should they find a way to make any.

Neither of the prisoners made any remark as they were being carried in, although their scowls spoke volumes. Neither had anything to say when, having been placed in separate cells, they were carefully searched by the sheriff, while Pete and Babe held them.

At last the work was done. All weapons and the contents of their pockets were taken from them, and although it was deemed wise to take the handcuffs and shackles from them, so that they could have an opportunity of resting, the sheriff made up his mind that he would keep a close eye upon them through the little hatch in the door.

Marcia was searched by an old woman whose duty it was to sweep out the office every morning, and who came in just as the last of the prisoners were placed in the cell. Then, when everything with which the hag could do mischief had been taken from her, Wild Pete took off her handcuffs and left her to her reflections.

"Phew!" sighed Wild Pete, as he stood at the door of the office and looked down the street. "Thet job's done, an' it wuz er terror."

"You're right, captain. Let's take er drink," remarked the sheriff, removing his big cigar for a moment, and then replacing it in his mouth in a hurry, as if he regretted losing so much smoke.

"I will," agreed Wild Pete.

Sol looked around to see that everything was safe, and as he saw that Dan and Babe were both standing near the door to the cell-room and were occasionally peering into the hatch, he merely cautioned them to keep their eyes on the jail, and sauntered out, as if there were nothing in the world on his mind.

"We'll go down ter King Walters's place," he said.

"All right."

They had just reached the corner of the street, when the sound of hoofs caught Wild Pete's ear, and without a word he rushed back to where Diablo was standing quietly behind the wagon, loosened the lariat that held him, and leaping upon his back, dashed after two horses, that, ridden by a man and a woman, were going at full speed toward the house in which Grant had led them such a dance the day before.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE END OF THE GANG.

SHARKEY had caught sight of the detective at the same moment that Wild Pete had seen him, and putting spurs to his own horse, he had given a cut with his whip to that ridden

by Sue, and had dashed away to the house at the top speed of the tough little bronchos.

"Ef I kin once git inside thar, I'll bet he'll never hev me," panted the desperado.

He looked at the girl, and saw that she was in a state bordering upon unconsciousness, and that he could do with her as he pleased now.

"Cuss her! She's give me er lot uv trouble. Come mighty near shootin' me through ther head out thar on ther plain. Would ef I hedn't happened ter look around at ther right minute. Wal, it's all right. I'll jist drop inter ther house hyar, an' git ther money ther boss hez hid in ther cellar. Then we kin keep dark hyar in some uv them holes an' corners ez I knows on, an' git on ther night train. Thet is, ef this cussed Wild Pete don't spile everything," he added.

He looked back, and a grim smile of triumph passed over his face as he saw that Diablo could not keep up with the two horses that were bounding along the rough streets with almost as much freshness as when they left Bob Grant's ranch the night before.

"Thet black horse is played out. Thet's what's ther matter with him," he muttered. "What could he expect, after running him from the city to the ranch and back again, all in twenty-four hours."

Sam Sharkey reached the house long before Wild Pete came in sight, and making his way inside by means known only to the Death-in-Life Band and one or two trusted men on the ranch, he went straight down to the cellar that the detective said he would investigate at some future time.

He held a small bull's-eye lantern in his hand, that he had taken from the kitchen, where he had left Sue, now in a dead swoon, and helpless, as he had noted, with satisfaction, before going down-stairs.

In a corner of the cellar he found the three bags of bogus money, where they had been thrown by Bob Grant when he suspected that he was in danger of being caught. Sharkey gave them a contemptuous kick, and went on to where some other bags of coin were lying, also tied up ready for transportation.

"Ah, hyar's ther stuff. I'll take this along, an' then I'll be all right, when I git East, with a pretty little wife, who is goin' ter git er fortune ez soon ez ther will she hez in her pocket thar kin be proved. Things looks bright fer yer, Sam Sharkey!"

He rubbed his hands joyously, and cast the rays of the lantern about the cellar, to see whether there was anything else that might be worth taking away.

His eyes glistened as he noted that there were a number of weapons comprising Winchester, revolvers and bowie-knives, and all of the latest pattern, lying in a corner.

"I'll take some uv them when I go," he muttered. "I only wish I could hev them all."

He turned away with a sigh of gratification, and was going up-stairs to make sure that all the fastenings, that he had secured carefully when he had entered the house, were still all right.

"I don't think Wild Pete or any one else could find ther way in till I let them in, an' I'm sure ter do thet."

He was laughing to himself at this conceit, when suddenly a voice rung out, fiercely:

"Hands up!"

Involuntarily Sam Sharkey raised his hands above his head, as he looked up the cellar stairs.

There stood Wild Pete, with a six-shooter in his hand pointed straight at the head of the desperado.

Sam Sharkey trembled like a leaf.

How had this man got through the locked and barred door, so as to be standing here like an avenging spirit at the very moment that Sharkey considered himself quite safe.

Sam asked himself this question as he stood there shaking in an agony of superstitious fear.

Wild Pete and his pistol poised in his hand, and with his long hair framing a face rendered pale as that of a ghost for want of rest, came slowly down the stairs, gazing straight into Sharkey's eyes.

The villain could not resist the awful look in the eyes of the man who he knew would be his death.

With a yell of reckless rage, he reached for his revolver, and at the same instant there was a bang that, in the confined space of the cellar, was like the boom of a cannon.

It was the last earthly sound Sam Sharkey heard!

Square in the middle of the forehead entered the bullet from Wild Pete's pistol, and without a cry, Sam Sharkey half-turned and fell dead.

The detective walked down the stairs, and bending over the body, examined it to see whether any life remained.

"Died with his boots on! Well, I would rather have had a chance to try him according to law, but it would have come to about the same thing, except that he would have died by the rope instead of the bullet. Such fellows are better out of the way."

Wild Pete was not a heartless man, but he had had so much to do with rascals of Sam Sharkey's type that he could not be expected to entertain much sentiment with regard to them.

He straightened the body and left it where it fell until he could bring a coroner and have it taken away, and then he went up-stairs to attend to Sue.

She had fallen on the floor, and was sleeping naturally, as the detective assured himself by bending over her and listening to her breathing. He found a big overcoat in an adjoining room, and he threw it over her, ere he made his way to the stable, and let himself out that way.

As he mounted Diablo, he looked up at the little window in the loft and smiled, as he said to himself.

"If I had not known of that way of getting into the house I might never have caught Mr. Samuel Sharkey. It's a strange thing that the sharpest crooks always overlook some little point that leads to their ruin. Well, it is well that it is so, for the sake of the peace and safety of the community."

He rode gayly along to the jail and his fatigue seemed to have disappeared as he thought how well he had arranged everything so that he had caught the rascals red-handed, as it were.

When he reached the office of the jail he found the sheriff in his office-chair, calmly puffing away at another big cigar, while Dan McPhelan and Babe Vincent each held a similar one between his teeth, the three men being the picture of contentment.

"Everything all right?" asked the detective, cheerily, as he dismounted and stood in the doorway, flicking his boot with his quirt.

"All right!" was the sententious reply of the sheriff.

"Good! I'll take er look in an' see whether they air lookin' out through the bars."

The detective strolled carelessly to the little hatchway in the door and looked in.

An exclamation of rage and surprise burst from his lips, and he began fumbling madly at the lock of the door.

"What's ther matter?" asked all three of his companions together.

Wild Pete did not answer, but continued tugging blindly at the door.

"The key! The key!" he shouted, hoarsely.

Sol, startled out of his usual *sang froid* for once, rushed to the door, and with a mighty effort, pulled Wild Pete away and looked in himself, "Holy smoke!" he bawled, as he pulled one of his revolvers and placed the muzzle in the hole.

Wild Pete knocked the weapon aside.

"No. Not thet way. Give 'em er chance. I don't believe in shootin' even er rat in er trap."

"What do yer want ter do, then?" demanded Sol, in a surly tone.

"Give me them keys, an' I'll show yer."

"No one handles them keys but ther sheriff, an' his name is Solomon Simpson," returned the sheriff, stiffly.

"Oh, durn yer official dignity," exclaimed Wild Pete, impatiently. "Open thet door!"

"Wal, ef yer want ter be er durned fool, hyar goes."

Babe and Dan had got to the hatch while their two companions were disputing, and were looking into the cell-room with looks expressive of utter bewilderment.

Bob Grant and Wintry Jim had got out-of

their cells somehow, and had each managed to tear away one of the iron bars of the cells, which they were holding in their hands, threatening to brain the first man that entered the room!

With a jerk, Sol threw open the door.

The two prisoners stood looking at the four men outside, without saying a word, but with an expression that told how thoroughly in earnest they were.

Wild Pete advanced into the doorway, and said, quietly:

"Go back into your cells."

The only response was a slight sneer on the dark countenance of Bob Grant. Wintry Jim did not move a muscle, but his one eye was fastened upon the detective with a malignant expression that boded ill for him should he get within reach of the iron bar.

"Go back into your cells," repeated Wild Pete.

Not a movement.

He deliberately threw his pistols on the desk in the office, and with a whoop of defiance, sprung into the cell room.

Both men aimed a sweeping blow at him with their iron bars, but he dodged them, and the two pieces of iron coming together, confused them for the moment.

This was the detective's chance.

He threw his arm around Bob Grant's waist, and with a clever back-heel, threw him over upon his head, on the stone flooring, where he lay stunned for the time being.

Wintry Jim recovered himself during this proceeding, and swinging his iron bar, would assuredly have knocked out the brains of the detective, had not chance interposed to save him. The bar caught in the cell door of Marcia, who was eagerly watching the fight, and dropped from his hand.

In a moment the detective was upon him, and throwing him to the floor, would have choked him to death, but that Bob Grant, getting over the blow that had stunned him, came forward to the rescue of his partner.

He caught the detective by the throat and pulled him back, while Wintry Jim, with a dangerous gleam in that one eye, rose hastily and reached for his iron bar.

It was then that Babe Vincent could not restrain himself any longer. His aim was prompt and sure, and Bob Grant fell dead with a bullet in his heart.

The confusion of the shot was Wintry Jim's chance. He dropped the iron bar as if it had been red-hot, and, without a word, sprung to the door, and knocking aside Dan McPhelan, who was in such a state of bewilderment that he did not know where he was, gained the street, and sprung upon the back of one of the bronchos.

Waving one of Wild Pete's pistols, that he had snatched from the desk as he passed it, he dashed up the street, and disappeared.

Wintry Jim was never caught. He got out of that part of the country, and was never seen in Wyoming again. He resumed his old life of a gambler, which he had been persuaded by Bob Grant to abandon temporarily for the more precarious business of making counterfeit money, and it is said that he is still alive, for a man with white hair and one eye nearly broke a faro-bank at the new mining town of Creede, the other day, and there is strong reason to suspect that he is Wintry Jim, under another name.

The death of Bob Grant broke up the Death-in-Life Band. Wild Pete—or Peter Swift, to give him his correct name, turned over all the bogus money to the authorities at Washington, where it was destroyed, according to law. The good money, that was found in the house, was claimed by the lawyer Wild Pete engaged to look after the interests of Susan Grant. She also became the owner of the ranch, which, indeed, had belonged to her father, and was never the rightful property of Robert Grant at any time. There was no particular need to prove the will of her grandfather, because she was his natural heiress now that he had no other descendants living. But the lawyer wanted to earn his fee, and the will was duly proved, so that Susan Swift is now one of the richest women in the West. She owns shares in silver mines that are panning out richer every year, and in fact she cannot estimate her wealth.

Acting under the advice of Wild Pete, she

went to a New York academy for a year, and came forth from it at the end of that time a refined young lady. It was not difficult for her to become so, for she had always been a lady at heart in all the qualities that are necessary to make a woman deserving of that title. Best of all, however, she is a true-hearted American girl, whom fortune cannot spoil, any more than troubles could sour.

Babe Vincent has returned to the East, and is now assisting his father in the management of his large wholesale establishment in New York. He has had his fling out West, and is now content to settle down, although he sometimes longs for the free life of Wyoming, when he assisted Wild Pete in running down the rascals that formed the Death-in-Life Band. He goes out West for about a month every year. He says if he did not have that much time in the saddle once in a while he should die of *ennui*.

The scene is a conservatory off a brilliant ball-room. The soft perfume of exotics makes a delightful change from the hot, close atmosphere of the brilliantly-lighted hall, and the soft glow of colored electric light among the green leaves gives a fairy-like aspect to this nook, so near to and yet so far from the giddy throng, laughing and dancing almost within touch of the occupants of the conservatory.

A fountain splashes in the midst of the palms and flowers and furnishes a fitting accompaniment to the voice of a young girl, in a soft, clinging white dress, who is sitting on a low fauteuil by the side of a fountain basin. A young man leans over. He is in faultless evening costume, and his blue eyes and crisp curling red-brown hair proclaim him to be an Irishman. The girl is saying:

"Dan, you risked your life for me out in Wyoming two years ago, and I'm not the woman to forget a thing like that. If you want me you can have me. I propose to marry for respect and love. Do you see? And I don't care what any one says."

"Faith, Sue, O'd rather you'd put the love first and the respect afterward. But, be the powers, Oi'm so glad to get yez that Oi ought not to say much about that."

He took the girl in his arms, in spite of her slight resistance, and bestowed a hearty smack upon her lips.

"Oh, Dan, there's somebody looking at us," she exclaimed in affright, as a tall, handsome man stood in the entrance of the conservatory and gazed at the scene with an amused smile. Dan recognized him, and there was no shame in his voice as he said, still holding the girl's hand:

"Oi'm glad you've come. Who has a better right to know that Oi've won the best and prettiest girl in the United States? Oi would not have asked her to marry me while Oi was poor, but faith, captain, now that you've proved that my grandfather was one of the rich men of New York, and that I am heir to all his money, why shouldn't Oi pl'aze meself, if Sue is willing?"

"And I am, Mr. Swift," put in the girl with a rosy blush that compelled Dan to kiss her again.

"Mr. Swift?" repeated the detective, with a reproachful smile. "Am I Mr. Swift to you now?"

"No," said the girl, quickly. "I beg your pardon. The name I like you by will always be Wild Pete, the Broncho-Buster."

THE END.

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